

# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order  
started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896



**Visions of Advaita**  
**January 2020**

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# THE ROAD TO WISDOM

## Swami Vivekananda on Advaitic Manifestation

The more we grow in love and virtue and holiness, the more we see love and virtue and holiness outside. All condemnation of others really condemns ourselves. Adjust the microcosm (which is in your power to do) and the macrocosm will adjust itself for you. It is like the hydrostatic paradox, one drop of water can balance the universe. We cannot see outside what we are not inside. The universe is to us what the huge engine is to the miniature engine; and indication of any error in the tiny engine leads us to imagine trouble in the huge one. Every step that has been really gained in the world has been gained by love; criticising can never do any good, it has been tried for thousand of years. Condemnation accomplishes nothing. A real Vedantist must sympathise with all. Monism, or absolute oneness is the very soul of Vedanta. Dualists naturally tend to become intolerant, to think theirs as the only way. We divide ourselves into two to love God, myself loving my Self. God has created me and I have created God. We create God in our image; it is we who create Him to be our master, it is not God who makes us His servants. When we know that we are one with God, that we and He are friends, then come equality and freedom. So long as you hold yourself separated by a hair's breadth from this Eternal One, fear cannot go. The Absolute cannot be worshipped, so we must worship a manifestation, such a one as has our nature. Jesus had our nature; he became the Christ; so can we, and so must we. Christ and Buddha were the names of



a state to be attained; Jesus and Gautama were the persons to manifest it. We make our own environment, and we strike the fetters off. The Atman is the fearless. When we pray to a God outside, it is good, only we do not know what we do. When we know the Self, we understand. The highest expression of love is unification. Man is the highest being that exists, and this is the greatest world. We can have no conception of God higher than man, so our God is man, and man is God. When we rise and go beyond and find something higher, we have to jump out of the mind, out of the body and the imagination and leave this world; when we rise to be the Absolute, we are no longer in this world. Man is the apex of the only world we can ever know. All we know of animals is only by analogy, we judge them by what we do and feel ourselves. The sum total of knowledge is ever the same, only sometimes it is more manifested and sometimes less. The only source of it is within, and there only is it found.

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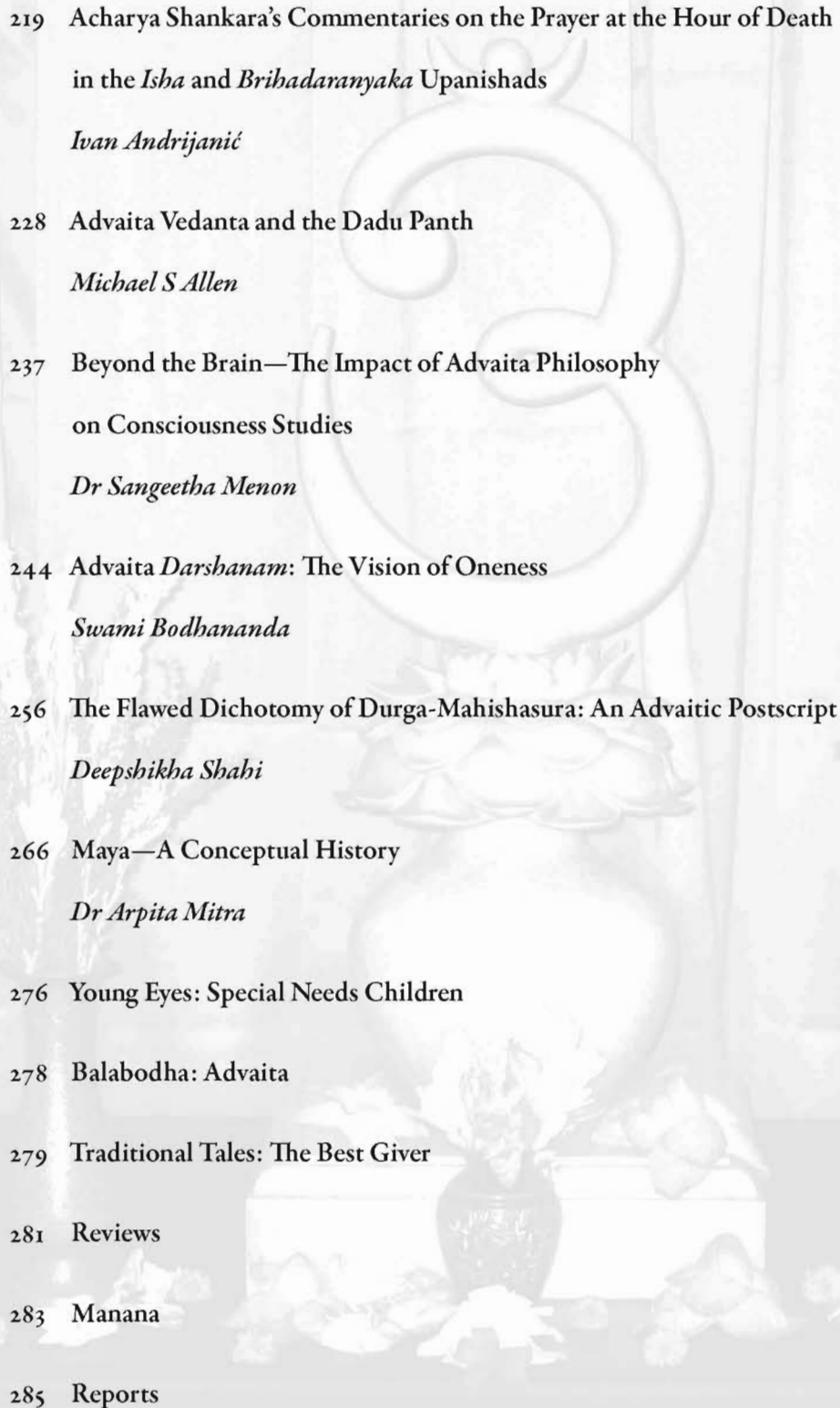
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## TO OUR READERS

**D**IFFERENCE IS THE PRIME cause of suffering. Perceiving difference makes one subject to a vast array of emotions like fear, anger, hatred, jealousy, and pride. All the major religions and faith traditions of the world teach the removal of the negative emotions mentioned above. However, the cause of these negative emotions is also the cause of positive emotions like love, empathy, and compassion. While most faith traditions prescribe the transcending of negative emotions and the cultivating of positive emotions, very few traditions stress the need for transcending all, negative and positive, emotions, and the adherents of most traditions consider it their goal to be established in these positive emotions, thereby becoming dependent on a pleasant mental state.

Sanatana Dharma, through its numerous branches of spiritual discipline, has proven time and again that true spirituality is all about transcending the mind. As many gurus have put it, a chain is a chain, irrespective of whether it is iron or golden. Perceiving the inherent divinity of the universe, both in the living and the non-living, is the only way to transcend the perception of difference and to embrace the eternal existence

of the Divine and the transitoriness of this universe. With this realisation, the individual and the collective become one and human suffering becomes immaterial.

Among the disciplines practised to go beyond distinctions, the discipline of Advaita Vedanta is the royal road to realising the identity of the One and the Many. This issue attempts to understand this discipline by inspecting the varied *Visions of Advaita*. With this issue we enter the 125th year of *Prabuddha Bharata*.

We thank our subscribers and readers for having supported us for these 124 years. We invite them to send us letters or emails, giving their feedback, and also expressing their views on issues that find place in the pages of this journal. We thank the staff of the journal for ensuring a smooth ride. We are grateful to all the authors, researchers, reviewers, photographers, artists, publishers who have sent their books for review, proofreaders, copyeditors, advertisers, patrons, donors, webpage designers, and well-wishers. Their support and encouragement has ensured that gems of wisdom and insights of depth have reached the minds of countless, month after month, year after year.



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# TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत ।

**Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!**

## **Ekashloki of Acharya Shankara**

January 2020  
Vol. 125, No. 1

Translated by Swami Narasimhananda

### आदिशंकराचार्यकृत एकश्लोकी

किं ज्योतिस्तवमानुमानहनि मे रात्रौ प्रदीपादिकं  
स्यादेवं रविदीपदर्शनविधौ किं ज्योतिराख्याहि मे ।  
चक्षुस्तस्य निमीलनादिसमये किं धीर्धियो दर्शने  
किं तत्राहमतो भवान्परमकं ज्योतिस्तदस्मि प्रभो ॥

*Kim jyotis-tava-bhanuman-ahani me ratrau pradipadikam  
Syadevam ravi-dipa-darshana-vidhau kim jyotirakhya hi me.  
Chakshus-tasya nimilanadisamaye kim dhirdhiyo darshane  
kim tatrahamato bhavan-paramakam jyotis-tadasmī prabho.*

The guru asks: 'What is your source of light?' The student replies: 'My source of light in the day is the sun.' Guru: 'What is your source of light in the night?' Student: 'Lamp and the like.' Guru: 'Let that be so. Please tell me what is your source of light to see the sun and the lamp?' Student: 'The eyes.' Guru: 'What is the source of light in times like when your eyes are closed?' Student: 'It is the intellect.' Guru: 'What is your source of light to see the intellect?' Student: 'Then, it is me, the pure Consciousness.' Guru: 'Therefore, you are that supreme light.' Student: 'Sir, I realise that I am that supreme light.'

## EDITORIAL

# *Practising Advaita*

**A**DVAITA VEDANTA OR ADVAITA IS first and foremost a spiritual discipline, a method of sadhana, a path that can be taken by anyone wanting to know one's true nature. Let us see how to practise Advaita. For this, first we need to understand what is Advaita. We also need to understand what it is not and then we have to see, step-by-step, the method, the way to practise Advaita.

### ***What is Advaita?***

When you stand in front of a mirror, you see your reflection there. That reflection is completely dependent upon you. It cannot be there if you were not there. You cannot see that reflection if your mind was not focussed there. Your mind cannot be focussed if you do not have the sense, 'I see my reflection'. Just look around yourself, not just at your reflection in a mirror, but everything or everyone around you. You cannot see anything or anyone if you do not have the sense, 'I see this or her or him'.

When you see something or someone, even your reflection in a mirror, you see that which is seen as something different from you. Though the reflection in the mirror cannot be there without you, you see the reflection as something separate from you. It is not separate but you sense a separation because of a wrong understanding. We see everything or everyone as separate or distinct or different from us. In their essence, nothing or no one is separate from you. I am not separate from you. You are not separate from me. We do not understand this because of

a fundamental error in the way we see things. We could call it a manufacturing defect.

How do we know that we have a manufactur-

---

**In their essence, nothing or no one is separate from you. You are not separate from me.**

---

ing defect? Suffering is the indicator that we have some problem by default. If things were working fine, we should not be suffering. We should not be having all the problems like greed, jealousy, anger, pride, and hatred. The way to get around this manufacturing defect is the way of Advaita. To know that there is no difference between you and what you see is Advaita. It goes further. You see yourself changing with time. You see yourself changing with place. If you go to Alaska, you will certainly feel cold! You go to the Sahara Desert in summer and of course, you will melt! Advaita is the knowledge that you do not change with time and place. It is the knowledge that you will not change even if your body stops functioning, even if you die, or more accurately, even if your body dies.

Advaita is the path that will take you beyond suffering, beyond separation, beyond distinctions, beyond differences. Advaita is the path to the knowledge that there is nothing or no one from which you will be ever separate.

### ***What is Not Advaita?***

Advaita is not merging into something. It is the understanding that there is nothing or no one to be merged into just like that there is nothing or



no one different from you. Advaita is not merely denying the experiences that you have but it is asserting that these experiences are not real, but are merely factual statements. Advaita is not denying the existence of this universe but it is asserting that this universe is not really what it looks like. Just like when you see water on a tarred road in an afternoon, you go near it and find that there is no water, Advaita is going near the true nature of this universe and finding that everything in it is only a permutation and combination of that one, true, Reality, which is beyond any name and form.

The mind and the body are not obstacles to practising Advaita. The mind will have its ups and downs. That is its nature. The body will have its strengths and weaknesses, its health and illnesses. That is its nature. You definitely do not blame a pen for not working. Writing is not there in your pen. It is in you. If the pen does not work, you change the pen till you can write what you want to write. Your true nature, the Reality, is in you, the real, not in the body or the mind. You will keep on changing the body and the mind, till you get that real you.

Advaita is not something that cannot be practised in the body and the mind. You might ask: 'I am in a body; how can I understand something beyond the body?' Advaita answers: 'The truth is that you are not in a body; you are mistaking yourself to be a body. How can you understand the truth if you insist on believing what is false? If you insist that there is water on that tarred road, in the afternoon, and do not go near it to examine if there really is water, how can you know the truth that there is no water? And, will that water quench your thirst?'

Yes, we need the water of Advaita to quench the thirst of suffering. We need to experience our non-separate nature to be free. Let us now see how to do it.

### **The Step-by-Step Method of Advaita**

You see everything changing around you. You are yourself changing. Your body keeps on changing. Your mind keeps on changing. For something to be real, it should not change. So, whatever you see around you is not real. Your body and your mind are not real. What is it in you that has not changed since your birth? Analyse this. You will understand that the sense of 'I' has been constantly in you since your birth. You have this sense while you are awake. You have this sense of 'I' while dreaming. Though you do not know what happens in deep sleep, when you are not dreaming, your 'I', your real 'I' remains, and that is why, when you wake up, you say that you had a good sleep. Your real 'I' was seeing it all, it sees everything all the time. Catch that 'I'. Let us see how to do that.

Your mind has desires. A desire becomes a thought. A thought becomes a resolve. A resolve might turn into an action. That action might fulfil your desire. When the desire is fulfilled, there is some time, when your mind is free from any thought. This time could be in seconds or in minutes. Be on the lookout for this thought-less time of the mind. If you increase your alertness, you will see that this thought-less state of the mind happens even when no desire is fulfilled. It could be just after you have woken up from sleep. It could be just before going to bed. It could be some other time. Look for this space and just watch that moment. Watch for this space while you are waking. Try to consciously watch this space even when you are dreaming.

No thoughts. No prayer. No hymns. No chanting. Just watch this space. There is hidden your real 'I' in these spaces. The good news is that this space of your real 'I', this space of thought-less mind is not different from anyone or anything. This space is the real you. This is Atman. This is Brahman. This is Advaita.





## ***What Vedanta Means to Me***

**Swami Chetanananda**

**W**Henever someone asks me, ‘What is Vedanta?’ this reminds me of a story. Once a great teacher of Vedanta was invited by a group of people to give a talk. When he arrived at the lecture hall, he asked the audience, ‘Do you know what I am going to tell you?’ The people said, ‘No’.

‘Then I shall not say anything to you, because you have no background.’ He left the hall.

The group invited him again on the following week—but this time the leaders planned in advance. They told the audience to say ‘yes’ if the teacher asked them the same question. The teacher was escorted to the hall, and sure enough, he asked the same question. This time

the audience replied, ‘Yes’. Immediately the teacher said, ‘You know everything, so I have nothing to say’, and he left.

Again the group leaders invited the teacher to speak, and again they made a plan for the teacher’s visit: half of the audience was to say ‘yes’ and the other half to say ‘no’. When the teacher came for the third time and he asked, ‘Do you know what I am going to tell you?’, the audience responded as they had been instructed. The teacher said, ‘Those who have said ‘no’, please learn from those who have said ‘yes’. He left without another word.

The people were puzzled and did not know what to do. They finally decided that the next time the teacher came, they would simply remain silent. After repeated requests, the teacher came once more. He again asked the same

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Swami Chetanananda is the minister-in-charge of the Vedanta Society of St Louis, USA.

question. This time he did not get any answer: the entire audience was absorbed in deep silence. He felt that this was the right time to talk to them about Vedanta.

This is the age of jets, rockets, and satellites. People move speedily and expect to achieve everything quickly, if not instantly. People who are unfamiliar with Vedanta do not realise that they are trying to learn in five minutes about a spiritual tradition that has been handed down to us for the last five thousand years. I know that I am not doing proper justice to Vedanta by trying to describe it in this short article, but nevertheless I shall try to answer the question: 'What is Vedanta?'

Vedanta is the culmination of knowledge, the sacred wisdom of the Hindu sages, and the transcendental experience of the seers of Truth. It is the essence, or conclusion, of the Vedas. As the Upanishads come at the end of the Vedas, so their philosophy is called 'Vedanta.' Literally, 'Veda' means knowledge and '*anta*' means end. The main tenets of Vedanta are as follows:

1. Brahman is the ultimate Reality, the One without a second. It is Existence-Consciousness-Bliss absolute. It is beyond name and form, devoid of qualities, without beginning or end. It is the unchanging Truth, beyond space, time, and causation. This vast, infinite Brahman manifests itself as the universe and individual beings through its inscrutable power of *maya*. Thus the One becomes many. When Brahman is associated with its *maya*, It is called God or *ishvara*.

2. The universe is apparent, like water in a mirage, and is continuously changing. We perceive the universe through space, time, and causation. Space begins when one gets a body, time begins when one starts thinking, and causation begins when one becomes limited. Moreover, this beautiful, tangible universe disappears from one's awareness when one enters the sleep state

or merges into *samadhi*, and the universe reappears in the waking state. Therefore, this world is in the mind.

3. Human beings are divine. Their real nature is the Atman, which is infinite, eternal, pure, luminous, ever free, blissful, one without a second, and identical with Brahman. Human beings are not sinners. They make mistakes and suffer for them because of ignorance. As darkness dissipates when light dawns, so ignorance disappears with the advent of knowledge. Bondage and freedom are in the mind. When one thinks of weakness and bondage, one becomes weak and bound. When one thinks of strength and freedom, one becomes strong and free. No human being wants slavery. Joy lies only in freedom, which is, as Vedanta declares, the inherent nature of all beings. The goal of human life is to realise one's true Self, which is one with Brahman or God, and the purpose of religion is to teach one how to manifest the innate divinity in every moment of life.

4. How does one manifest the divinity within? Vedanta suggests four yogas: (a) karma yoga, the path of unselfish action; (b) jnana yoga, the path of knowledge; (c) raja yoga, the path of meditation; and (d) bhakti yoga, the path of devotion. The word 'yoga' signifies the union of the individual soul with the cosmic soul.

5. Truth is one and universal. It cannot be limited to any country, race, or individual. All religions of the world express the same Truth in different languages and in various ways. Just as the sun does not belong to any one person or country, so also Truth is not confined to one particular religion or philosophy. No one can say that the sun is a Christian sun or a Hindu sun or a Buddhist sun or a Jewish sun or an Islamic sun. Vedanta proclaims 'Truth is one; sages call it by various names'<sup>1</sup> and promulgates the harmony of religions. According to Vedanta, as different

rivers originate from different sources but mingle in the ocean, losing their names and forms, so all the various religious paths that human beings take, through different tendencies, lead to God, or the Truth.<sup>2</sup>

Now if someone were to ask me, ‘What do you suggest that I read to learn about Vedanta?’, it would be hard for me to give an answer. Vedanta is a vast subject. Its scriptures have been evolving for the last five thousand years. The three basic scriptures of Vedanta are the Upanishads, the revealed truths; the *Brahma Sutra*, the reasoned truths; and the Bhagavadgita, the practical truths. But it is hard for someone to get the essence of these scriptures without the help of a teacher and without studying the commentaries.

Sometimes Westerners complain that Vedanta literature is full of non-English technical words that they do not understand. I tell beginners to read Swami Vivekananda’s lectures on the four yogas, especially jnana yoga. Swamiji said: ‘I have a message to the West, as Buddha had a message to the East’ (5.314). That message is Vedanta. He took the essence of the Upanishads and presented that essence to Westerners in simple, rational, logical, and scientific language that they could understand.

Swamiji said that America is a wonderful field for Vedanta, because the American people love democracy and freedom. These two things are in their blood. The Vedantic concept of God is democratic: Each person is divine. Moreover, Americans are great lovers of freedom—so much so that they installed the Statue of Liberty at Ellis Island, near the New York harbour, as their presiding deity.

Some people complain that Vedanta is dry and difficult. Let me answer the first objection: Vedanta is not dry. The goal of Vedanta is ananda or bliss. How could it be dry? That bliss, that

ananda, is only in the Infinite and not in finite objects—‘*Nalpe sukhamasti bhumaiva sukham*; there is no joy in the finite, the Infinite alone is joy’.<sup>3</sup> The *Taittiriya Upanishad* says: ‘All beings are born from bliss, live in bliss, and at the time of dissolution merge into bliss.’<sup>4</sup> So, how can Vedanta be dry? People are searching for bliss in the wrong places and that is why they complain and suffer. Bliss cannot be bought in a shopping mall. It is within us.

This reminds me of a funny story: Brahma, the creator, gave everything to his children except peace and bliss. He thought that if he gave those things to them, they would never return to him. He asked other gods: ‘Where should I hide peace and bliss?’

One suggested: ‘Put them under the ocean.’

Brahma replied: ‘My children will find them with the help of a submarine.’

Another suggested: ‘Keep peace and bliss in outer space.’

Brahma said: ‘My children will use a space-shuttle to find them.’

Still, another suggested: ‘Bury them underground.’

Brahma said: ‘They will use dynamite to get them.’

Finally, Brahma decided to hide peace and bliss in the hearts of his children. As we know, God dwells in the heart, but it is not easy to realise that Truth.

As to the second objection—Vedanta is difficult—only lazy people talk like that. Such people have never tried to learn Vedanta from a qualified teacher. And they are also afraid to read Vedanta literature. Look, coconuts have sweet milk and meat inside. If you want those things, you have to remove the thick skin and break the shell of the coconut. One cannot learn Vedanta or any other philosophy by reclining on a lazy chair, smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee, and watching TV.



Another objection to Vedanta is that it emphasises the unreality of the world, saying, *jagat mithya*: the world is not real. Such people complain: 'It is foolish to say that my spouse, children, home, car, money, and other things are not real.'

Let me define reality according to Vedanta: '*Satyatvam hy-asman-mate trikala-abadhyatvam*'; according to our opinion the real is indeed that which does not cease to exist in the past, present, and future.<sup>5</sup> Is there any such thing in this world?

Anyhow, according to Vedanta, there are two kinds of reality: the absolute and the relative. Brahman is the absolute Reality, while the world is the relative reality. Yes, your spouse, children, headache, and stomach-ache are relatively real. They come and go. Let me tell you my observation: From the absolute standpoint, the world is not real. Nonetheless, an unreal doctor can remove an unreal disease by providing unreal medicine to an unreal patient. Similarly, an unreal guru can use an unreal mantra to remove the unreal ignorance of an unreal disciple.

In this connection, I want to explain two Sanskrit words: *asat* and *mithya*. *Asat* refers to something that does not exist and that cannot be seen such as a *bandhya putra*, a son of a barren woman. *Mithya* refers to something that does not exist but can be seen, such as water in a mirage. When the sun reflects on sand in a desert, we see something that looks like water. This is as illusory as the world itself.

Let me give another example: When you are in deep sleep, where do your spouse, children, and other things go? They disappear from the mind. When you wake up in the morning, the world reappears in the mind. So, Vedanta says that this universe is '*manasah-spandana-matram*'; just the vibration of the mind.<sup>6</sup> Our bodies are our worlds. We understand very well

that the body is not permanent. This world is a vacation village.

To me, this world is a museum. I have visited the Louvre in Paris and the Prado in Madrid, in addition to museums in London, Vienna, Rome, New York, Tokyo, and Mexico City. In every museum, I saw 'Do not touch' signs below the paintings. The paintings are for us to see but not to touch. If you touch a painting, the guard will take you out. In other words, don't be attached. Attachment brings misery. Suppose you are an artist and want to sell your painting of the Grand Canyon. There is a buyer, you are the seller, and I am a spectator. Actually, the seller and buyer do not enjoy the painting, because they are attached to it. It is the spectator, who has no attachment to the painting, who really enjoys the painting.

In Hollywood, I once gave a lecture on 'Non-attachment' in which I said: 'Everything belongs to God. Don't claim ownership of anything. Just be the caretaker. Live in this world as if you were vacationing at a Holiday Inn. Nothing will go with us when we leave this world.' Then I quoted from the Old Testament: 'I came naked from my mother's womb, and I will be naked when I leave. The Lord gave me what I had, and the Lord has taken it away.'<sup>7</sup>

After this lecture, an actor came to me and said: 'Swami, I am practising what you just said. My home and my car belong to the Bank of America, [they were mortgaged]; and my body belongs to Blue Cross and Blue Shield [an insurance company]. I have nothing, Swami.' I laughed.

In the 1950s I went to see P C Sarkar's magic show in the New Empire theatre in Calcutta. The magician used a chainsaw to cut a piece of wood. Then he placed a young girl in a wooden box and closed the lid. He used the chainsaw to cut the box in half in front of a thousand spectators. After a few minutes, the girl came through the

back door and walked down the aisle, saying, 'Hi, I am here'. Now, these one thousand people each bought a ticket paying twenty-five rupees. They knew for certain that the girl would not be cut in half, yet they still spent money to watch this illusion. That is maya—and we love to watch it.

My Vedanta teacher told me this story: Aham, the ego, fell in love with Buddhi, the intellect, and they got married. They were having a nice married life, full of fun and excitement.

One day Buddhi says to Aham: 'We are having such a nice time; we should share our joy with the Atman. That poor fellow is sleeping inside.'

Aham replies: 'My goodness! My sweet honey, don't rouse the Atman. As soon as it awakens, it will destroy both of us. Let the Atman sleep.'

This is happening to all of us.

My teacher told me another funny story: The world gives pain without being born. A young woman was sleeping alone in her room. Her father was out of town. Meanwhile, a thief entered her room. She became aware of it. She pretended as if she was talking in dream: 'When I shall get married, I will have three sons, and I will name them Ram, Shyam, and Chor [thief]. They will play outside. During dinnertime, I shall call them loudly, 'O Ram, Shyam, Chor!' Actually, Ram and Shyam were the names of her neighbours. As soon as she shouted out, they came and knocked at her door, and the thief was caught. The thief thought to himself: 'This woman is not married and has no children, still I have been caught by her neighbours.' From the absolute point of view, this world does not exist, but we are bound by maya.

My teacher also used the cinema as an analogy to explain this world: Every day many pictures pass through our minds. Similarly, in the movie house, many scenes appear on the screen. You see rain, fire, love scenes, murder scenes, and so on.

However, the screen does not get wet or burn with the rain and fire; it is unaffected. That screen is the Atman; the projector is the intellect, *buddhi*; the pictures on the film are desires; and the electric light is maya. That light makes small pictures appear big and vivid on the screen. Similarly, the inscrutable power of maya flashes the subtle desires of the intellect on the Atman, and they thus form various scenes. Like the screen in a movie house, the pure Atman is always unaffected.

In 1982, I asked the following question to the Shankaracharya of Govardhan Math at Puri: Is it possible for a Vedantin to perform ritualistic worship? He said, 'Yes'. Later, I found this explanation in *Bodhasara* by Narahari Acharya: A newly married girl in India is generally extremely bashful and keeps a veil over her head. Out of shyness, she does not talk to her husband in front of others, but she feels oneness with her husband in her heart. Still she loves to see her husband from a distance through an opening in her veil. Similarly, although a *jnani*, a knower of Brahman, experiences oneness with Brahman in her or his heart, the *jnani* still loves to worship the beloved Lord with devotion.<sup>8</sup>

When I read *Vicharasagara, Ocean of Discrimination*, by Nischaladasa, I found that he could not find God to bow down. In that connection, my friend referred to this verse from the *Vicharasagara*: '*Bodha chahi jako sukriti, bhajata rama nishkam. So mero hai atma, kakun karun pranam*'; one should perform good deeds and develop spiritual knowledge to worship Sri Ramachandra without motive. That Sri Ramachandra is my Atman, so how can I bow down to him?<sup>9</sup>

In our Vedanta class, sometimes we would debate on the concept of moksha in the different philosophical systems of India. One day we were debating the difference between Acharya Shankara's mukti and Lord Buddha's nirvana. Our teacher solved this problem with an

analogy: Lord Buddha and Acharya Shankara were on the same boat and it left the harbour. It gradually reached the deep sea; from there one cannot see the shore. The Buddha looked upwards and seeing the vast empty space of the sky, he said: '*Sarvam shunyam shunyam*; everything is void, void.' Shankara looked downwards and seeing the expansive water of the ocean, said: '*Sarvam purnam purnam*; everything is full, full.' One saw the negative and the other, the positive. Both were in the same boat on the ocean, and each described their experience differently. Some see the same glass of water as half-empty, and some as half-full. This illustration solved the debate.

After studying *Vedanta-sara*, we started to study *Sankhya Karika*. Our teacher made the class very interesting. He commented: In Vedanta, we hear quite often 'rope-snake, rope-snake'. This means that we see a rope in the darkness and think it is a snake, which is called superimposition. But when one brings a light, we see the rope as a rope. This is called de-superimposition. According to Vedanta, Brahman alone exists, and the jivas, individual souls, and the *jagat*, world, are superimposed on it by the inscrutable power of maya.

Now consider Sankhya philosophy: Prakriti, the primordial nature, is dancing with the three gunas—sattva, rajas, and tamas. She appears to be a beautiful dancing girl entertaining Purusha, the universal spirit, in an open theatre. Purusha is enjoying the wonderful performance. Then all of a sudden, a gust of wind blows away the dancing girl's wig and the rain washes away all of her makeup. Her beauty disappears. Out of shame, she runs off stage. After seeing her true unattractive form, Purusha loses interest and renounces her. According to Sankhya philosophy, this separation between Prakriti and Purusha is liberation.



Govardhan Math, Puri

A monk told me this story of how maya hypnotises us. We may repeat '*Aham Brahmasmi* I am Brahman', but we forget our true nature when we face danger and difficulties.

A famous Yatra troupe came to Hardwar to perform *Ramlila*, the life story of Sri Ramachandra. On that day, the episode was supposed to be the death of the villain, Ravana, but the actor was sick. The director decided to cancel the programme. The organisers then suggested that they would supply a Ravana and brought a man named Budhui, a confectioner who fries jalebis. He was gigantic, with a huge belly, a big moustache, large eyes, and long bushy hair. He told the director that he was illiterate and had no skill in acting. The director said: 'We shall dress you like the demon king Ravana with nice makeup. You will not have to speak too many lines, only say, "I am Ravana", and raise your mace from time to time.'

The performance began. Budhui, as Ravana, was on stage and began to stride around. Nala, Nila, Angada, and other monkeys in Sri Ramachandra's army ran away upon seeing the terrible Ravana. Finally, Hanuman arrived and asked, 'Who are you?'

Ravana replied: 'I am Ravana.'

Hanuman shouted: 'You rascal! You kidnapped our Mother Sita. I shall kill you right now.'

He then moved to attack Ravana, but the actor said: 'Mahavirji, please do not kill me. I am Budhui and make jalebi for living. These people

made me into Ravana.' Terrified, Budhui jumped from the stage into the audience. That ruined the *Ramlila* performance.

Thus, human beings forget their divine nature as they act in this world.

Once in Kansas City, Huston Smith and I spoke on Vedanta from the same platform. Huston had previously been the president of the Vedanta Society of St Louis. After the lecture, a young Christian asked Huston: 'You are a Christian Methodist. How can you get involved with other religions?'

Huston answered humorously: 'Well, young man, hold on to your faith. You see, I eat my regular food, and I take other religions in my life like vitamins, food supplements. They boost my energy and passion for Truth.'

On another occasion, Huston told me: 'Swami, Christ also taught four yogas. He said: "Love thy Lord with all thy heart", that is bhakti yoga; "with all thy mind", that is raja yoga; "with all thy soul", that is jnana yoga; and "with all thy strength", that is karma yoga.'<sup>10</sup>

I studied various kinds of Upanishadic meditations, but I wanted to know the secret of meditation according to the Vedantic tradition. One late evening in Varanasi, I went to the room of an old, wise monk and asked about meditation. He asked me: 'Do you know how to watch sandhi, the junction?' I could not understand his question.

He then explained: 'Here is a pearl necklace. A string is holding all these pearls, but you do not see the string. You see only the pearls. If you go near and minutely examine the necklace, you will see a bit of the string in the junction between the pearls. Those visible pearls represent innumerable thoughts, *chitta-vrittis*, that are rising on the string, which is consciousness, the Atman. Remember this analogy and meditate on this verse of the *Kena Upanishad*: 'When one

experiences the Atman in every thought wave, that is true knowledge; one attains immortality by it.'<sup>11</sup>

These are common questions of Vedanta students: Who is God? How does one see God? How does one realise God? These questions are answered in the Gita. If you want to know God, read chapters seven to ten of the Gita carefully; if you want to see God, read chapter eleven; and if you want to realise or enter into God, read chapter twelve. Sri Krishna clearly tells Arjuna that one can know God, *jñatum*; see God, *drashtum*; and enter into God, *praveshtum*, only through devotion.<sup>12</sup>

What is Vedanta? It is the ocean of wisdom. Acharya Shankara's answer to this question is: 'Brahman alone is real. The world is unreal. Each individual soul, *jiva*, is nothing but Brahman.'<sup>13</sup>

We are all divine beings but we are unaware of this. We are born in this world to taste the bliss of liberation-in-life, and not for the fulfilment of worldly desires. 'Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached.'<sup>14</sup>



## References

1. Rig Veda, 1.164.146.
2. See *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 1.4.
3. *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 7.23.1.
4. *Taittiriya Upanishad*, 3.6.1.
5. Madhusudana Sarasvati, *Advaita Siddhi*, Chapter 2, 'Satyadi-vakya-akhandarthatv-opapattih'.
6. Acharya Shankara's commentary on Acharya Gaudapada, *Mandukya Karika*, 4.62.
7. Job 1:21.
8. See Narahari, *Bodhasara*, 13.44-5.
9. Nischaladasa, *Vicharasagara*, 1.5.
10. Mark 12:30.
11. *Kena Upanishad*, 2.4.
12. See Gita, 11.54.
13. Acharya Shankara, *Brahmajnanavalimala*, 20.
14. *Complete Works*, 3.430.



# Swami Vivekananda's Vision of Advaita

Swami Atmarupananda

IN THE OPENING SCENE of the Bhagavadgita, Arjuna—ready for battle, confident in himself, in his brothers and their army, sure of the righteousness of his cause—asks Sri Krishna to take the chariot forward to the middle of the battlefield so that he might survey those who dare fight him. There he sees arrayed against him relatives, revered teachers, and those who have been friends since childhood; these are the people he is to kill, some of them dearer to him than life itself. He sees clearly for the first time the destruction that this war will bring; destruction of family, of tradition, of culture, of society. And he can't do it. It would be better to lay down his arms, allow his enemies to take the kingdom, and be reduced to begging his food rather than be responsible for such horror due to the selfish desire for a paltry kingdom.

When we read the Gita, we already know the outcome, and so we begin by thinking Arjuna to be a coward who has lost his way: after all, that's what Sri Krishna himself says. But we have first to identify with Arjuna, because we *are* Arjuna. His arguments against fighting are noble and cogent. They aren't the ravings of a lunatic nor the whimpering of a coward; rather they are the arguments of a good man who realises the horrors that are about to begin.<sup>1</sup> None of the Kauravas would have had such noble sentiments. Arjuna's sincerity shouldn't be questioned.

Sri Krishna begins his response by shaming Arjuna for his unmanliness. But it is a shaming

meant as a corrective, not as a destructive insult. He tells Arjuna that such weakness is beneath his dignity as a noble hero. And then he begins to teach him the glory of the Self, which is birthless, deathless, eternal, which neither kills nor is killed.

Why does Sri Krishna begin by teaching the glorious Atman? Later, he teaches the principles of action, meditation, bhakti, the nature of the incarnation of God, and so on. So why start with the highest truth, which traditionally has been reserved for the most competent aspirants, most often monks who have renounced the world?

Because that alone would give Arjuna the strength he needed. That alone would lift him to a perspective where even his valid moral and social objections would be seen as unfounded. Then alone could he be taught karma yoga, meditation, devotion, and other truths. First he had to be lifted to a perspective where the whole universe would be relativised, where—as Swami Vivekananda would say thousands of years later—he could see all the strife of this world as the play of puppies, where occasionally one gives a sharp bite to the ear of another and causes the other to yelp, but the mother knows all the while that it is just the play of puppies. Advaita alone could lift him to that perspective. No relative instruction could.

## ***A New Call to Self-Knowledge***

In modern times, Swamiji did the same work as Sri Krishna. His teaching begins with Advaita, rests in Advaita, and ends in Advaita. Even when

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teaching bhakti, he bases it on Advaita, where love, lover, and beloved become one.

The great Josephine MacLeod's first acquaintance with Swamiji is interesting in this connection. She first heard him giving a class in New York City in the winter of 1895. As he began to speak, she was lifted to a higher level of consciousness, where she saw no longer him but Sri Krishna standing there, as though declaring the Gita.<sup>2</sup> Yes, if Sri Ramakrishna was the Sri Krishna of Mathura and Vrindaban, Swamiji was the Sri Krishna of the Gita.<sup>3</sup>

Why does Swamiji begin and end with Advaita? Didn't Sri Ramakrishna emphasise bhakti?

Let's answer the second question first. Yes, undoubtedly there is an emphasis on bhakti in Sri Ramakrishna's teachings. But if one reads *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* carefully, one finds his teachings permeated by Advaita. Therefore, Sri Sarada Devi herself could write in support of maintaining Advaita at the Mayavati ashrama: 'Sri Ramakrishna was all Advaita and preached Advaita. ... All his disciples are Advaitins.'<sup>4</sup> Further, it was Sri Ramakrishna himself who trained the future Swamiji in Advaita, and who taught him how to carry his message to the world. Sri Sarada Devi even said that it was Sri Ramakrishna himself who was teaching the world *through* Swamiji.

Still, why were the approaches of Swamiji and of Sri Ramakrishna apparently different, even if it was Sri Ramakrishna that worked through Swamiji? Swamiji's *role* was different from Sri Ramakrishna's. Otherwise, only one of them would have been sufficient. Sri Ramakrishna's primary role was the generation of tremendous spiritual power and also the establishment of a grand ideal in himself: a historical tsunami of spiritual power washing over the world for centuries to come, embodying the highest ideals. The primary purpose of Swamiji was to direct

that vast wave of spiritual power to the benefit of all humanity.

To do that, Swamiji had to acquire a profound and detailed understanding of the world—historical, developmental, cultural, social, intellectual, and spiritual. He had to understand the historical forces that had led to the present world situation, and to understand the direction those forces were carrying the world into the future. And he had to understand not simple textbook history but the history of ideas and ideals, of religions, of the major institutions of society, the differences and similarities between the East and the West, the history of the nation-state and of civilisations, and the state of the common woman and man. It was for this that Sri Ramakrishna needed Swamiji.

So again, why did Swamiji emphasise Advaita? One reason is that Swamiji seems to have seen a period of cataclysmic disruption coming to the world, a period of great difficulty and suffering before a new civilisation could develop. That's another topic, and we won't develop it here, but only note it because Swamiji seems to have taught Advaita for the same reason that Sri Krishna taught it to Arjuna: it was the only medicine that would be strong enough.

### ***Human Being as Sinner or Human Being as God?***

But there is another reason that we will deal with here. Swamiji saw that the old ideas had failed humanity. The assumption all over the world, even in India, had been that ordinary people were weak, limited, prone to unrighteousness, incapable of understanding higher ideas, and dependent. Add to that the teaching of some traditions that the human being is a sinner by nature, due to which the estimation of humanity has been very low.

Yes, looking at the phenomenal person, one

can see the truth of this old assumption: even the best make mistakes, even the wisest make errors of judgement, and the vast majority of people struggle with basic right and wrong. But Swamiji saw the noumenal person, and therefore said that to call a person a sinner is a standing libel against the divinity of man,<sup>5</sup> that even the murderer is perfect God (8.129). So from different levels of perception, both are true—the weakness of the human being and the divinity of the human being. Why not, then, emphasise the higher truth, the eternal truth, the truth beyond all illusion? The other *is* illusion, *is* a wrong reading of the human being. Dirt isn't cleansed by dirt but by pure water. Darkness isn't illuminated by more darkness but by light.

Well, say some, we shouldn't emphasise the human being's divinity because it will lead to immorality and the breakdown of society if everyone thinks themselves to be God. In response, Swamiji asked if this teaching of the weakness of the human being had really helped the world. Has it made people moral? No, obviously not. So he said:

Gradual or not gradual, easy or not easy to the weak, is not the dualistic method based on falsehood? Are not all the prevalent religious practices often weakening and therefore wrong? They are based on a wrong idea, a wrong view of man. Would two wrongs make one right? ... I want to make an experiment. ... On the heights of the Himalayas I have a place where I am determined nothing shall enter except pure [non-dual] truth (8.140–1).

Like Sri Krishna with Arjuna on the battlefield, Swamiji saw that what the world needed was: strength to face the struggles of life, light in the midst of darkness, water in the midst of this desert of life, and truth in the midst of a world of falsehood. And so he took his audiences to the heights of Advaita, proclaiming the divinity of each soul.



### **The Method of Swamiji's Teaching**

How, then, did he teach Advaita? What were the characteristics of his teaching?

First let us look at his *Jnana Yoga*, as we have had it for more than one hundred years. A reading of Swamiji's *Karma Yoga* gives a good sense of the path of action—what it is and how to practise it. So with a reading of his *Raja Yoga* and *Bhakti Yoga*. Yet when we turn to his *Jnana Yoga*, we find that each lecture is beautiful, profound, yet the book doesn't hold together as a unit, nor does one finish it with the sense that one now understands what jnana yoga is as a path and how to practise it.

There is a simple reason for that. The other three yoga books were either written as a text on the subject like *Bhakti Yoga* or were made from transcribed classes on the subject given in a systematic manner like *Karma Yoga* and *Raja Yoga*. Not so *Jnana Yoga*, which was always a random collection of philosophical lectures given on a variety of subjects at different times and in different places. Hence, when read as individual lectures, they are beautiful; but as a systematic text, they don't hold together. There is not the same

emphasis on actual practices as one finds in his other three yogas.

There are four main reasons for this absence of specific practices in *Jnana Yoga*. But first, it should be said that Swamiji was always teaching the practice of Advaita; it is found throughout his *Complete Works*, and in a concentrated form in the following works: *Discourses on Jnana Yoga*, *Inspired Talks*, and all of his Northern California talks. But again, why is there not much focus in his *Jnana Yoga* on spiritual practice?

Firstly, he was teaching a philosophical outlook that was radically new to his audience. He was concerned that they get the concepts right; without that, there would be no foundation for practice. The path of knowledge is not a path of intellectual philosophy, but it must be grounded in correct intellectual understanding and so Swamiji's attention to teaching the ideas was essential for practice.

Secondly, his teaching of Advaita was central to his whole mission; so the clarification of ideas was all the more critical. Swamiji was not primarily teaching some simple jnana yoga disciplines for a few select students to practice. He was ever conscious of the fact that he was teaching the world for centuries to come. And he aimed at nothing less than changing the very direction of human thought and hence civilisation. He knew, as we have indicated above, that the old ideas which had governed human societies around the world had come to the end of their usefulness. He was therefore giving a new paradigm for a New Age—a new idea of self, a new idea of the world, a new idea of God, a new philosophy of work, a new understanding of society, a new reading of history, of psychology, of science, of language—and one could go on with the list. That is largely what one finds in the *Jnana Yoga* of disparate lectures.

The third reason is Swamiji's method of

teaching. Unlike Ramana Maharshi and other great teachers, Swamiji simply pointed to the truth and told people to understand it and then affirm it. Ramana Maharshi's teachings are perfectly harmonious with Swamiji's, but the emphasis on practice is different. Ramana Maharshi always emphasised self-inquiry: 'Who am I?' If a thought arises, ask, 'To whom does this thought belong?' Seek to know who you are. That's a good and very effective practice, again, harmonious with Swamiji's teachings.

But Swamiji's primary method was to first understand deeply enough so that the faith in the teaching is engendered; and then assert that truth in one's thinking and behaviour until one's very perception changes: 'Think on it day and night. ... "I am It. I am the Lord of the universe. Never was there any delusion." Meditate upon it with all the strength of the mind till you actually see these walls, houses, everything, melt away—body, everything, vanishes' (1.501).

There is a fourth reason for Swamiji's manner of teaching jnana yoga and it is the most important. He had the power to awaken that experience in his listeners just by telling them the principles. He didn't have to teach particular methods—that is for ordinary teachers. What need had he for that? He said: 'Oh, how calm would be the work of one who really understood the divinity of man! For such, there is nothing to do, save to open men's eyes. All the rest does itself' (8.261). This power of his is documented in many extraordinary anecdotes.

Josephine MacLeod wrote of the first occasion on which she heard Swamiji speak: 'He said something, the particular words of which I do not remember, but instantly to me that was truth, and the second sentence he spoke was truth, and the third sentence was truth. And I listened to him for seven years and whatever he uttered was to me truth. ... It was as if he made

you realise that you were in eternity. It never altered. It never grew. It was like the sun that you will never forget once you have seen.’<sup>6</sup>

Lillian Montgomery spoke of attending his classes in New York in June 1900:

Listening, veil after veil fell from your mind's eye—like a miracle, your concept of the universe, personality, of the relationship of the individual soul to God was changing. There was a dawning vision of a new set of values and a goal that would be the fulfilment of the heart's desire. Most of all it was as if you had heard the term ‘soul’ all your life, then, there you were gazing into one highly evolved for the first time, surprised by the full clearness of its beauty, its limpid purity, its tremendous power in repose. What you had imagined before to be ‘soul’ was such a poor, petty, insignificant thing (599).

We need specific practices. Swamiji had no such need. His words conveyed the experiential truth that he was describing.

### **Special Characteristics of Swamiji's Teaching**

Finally, let us look at some interesting characteristics of his teaching. As we have mentioned, Swamiji taught Advaitic affirmation more than any other practice. But let us examine his practical instruction more closely.

In several recorded classes and lectures, Swamiji taught the traditional *sadhana chatustaya*, fourfold discipline,<sup>7</sup> and made it clear that, to attain liberation, there could be no compromise with these requisites. But even as we begin the practise of these disciplines, we must acquire the right understanding as well; otherwise, why should we practise these disciplines?

We have already spoken of Swamiji's emphasis on explaining the principles. But the need for right understanding goes even deeper. Our problem, our bondage, is ignorance. And though that ignorance is metaphysical or spiritual rather than

intellectual, it expresses itself both as wrong perception and as wrong understanding. That is, because of our metaphysical ignorance, *avidya*, we perceive a material universe peopled by distinct objects and beings rather than the luminous Self; but there is also the element of understanding, of interpretation of what we are perceiving: we not only perceive a world and living beings but we *think* we are separate from them and from God; we not only perceive this material body and restless mind but we think that we *are* the body and mind, that we are born and die. So there is perception and then the interpretation of what we perceive, which is based on understanding.

Changing our perception is difficult. Therefore, we must first change our understanding. Once we have understood the truth about ourselves and the universe and begun practising the *sadhana-chatustaya*, we must affirm the truth in our thoughts and actions and reactions, both in meditation and in our daily lives. After our understanding has changed, slowly our perception begins to change also, because the whole universe is nothing but habits of perception and behaviour tied to wrong understanding. Even what we call the laws of nature are just habits.

The affirmation of truth is not self-hypnosis, but dehypnotisation, as Swamiji would say, and it is powerfully transformative: ‘I will compare truth to a corrosive substance of infinite power. It burns its way in wherever it falls—in soft substance at once, hard granite slowly, but it must.’<sup>8</sup> First we notice subtle changes in the way we perceive ourselves and the world around us. Then, with prolonged practice, we begin to see the world and everything within it as idea, not as physical fact. And finally, Swamiji promises us and the experience of sages assures us, the world will vanish and the Self will stand revealed.

Over the centuries many traditional Advaitins tended more and more towards scriptural

study and discussion, *shastra-charcha*, as their main practice. It was always one of the practices, but in time it became dominant. That led to what can be seen as a degeneration, where conviction or *jnana-nishtha* came to be seen as the sufficient goal of the Advaitin. Meditation, samadhi, and so on came to be seen as outside influences from tantra and yoga. And so we find teachers today who say that understanding and consequent conviction is everything. ‘Just know that you are the Self, and the world is unreal, and you are free,’ where ‘know’ means not a transcendent experience but ‘be convinced’. That’s not what Acharya Gaudapada said, nor Acharya Shankara, nor the *Yoga Vasishtha*. Look at the Vedantic texts like *Vivekachudamani*, *Upadesha Sahasri*, *Panchikaranam*, *Vedanta Sara*, and *Jivanmukti-Viveka*. For the realised soul, the Self stands revealed in its full glory, the universe disappears; and if it reappears, it is seen as but an appearance of the Self—not in conviction but in perception, in reality.

Swamiji stressed the value of conviction untiringly, praising Nachiketa as the embodiment of faith; but he never ended with it. It was a means, a practice. The goal was nothing short of the direct experience of the infinite Self, beyond time, beyond space, free of causation, alone, one without a second.

### **An Expanded Vision of Advaita**

As we have indicated, Swamiji saw the importance of Advaita in a much larger context than just as a path to transcendence for the spiritually fit. There are always only a few people who wholeheartedly seek to realise the Self. What about the vast mass of humanity? Are they to be left behind as part of the illusion of this world that is to be renounced and forgotten?

Not for Swamiji. He felt first of all that Sri Ramakrishna had come for the welfare of all,

not for a select group of spiritual aspirants. He further felt that the truth of the one Self was meant for all, would be helpful to all. He told us to go door to door and tell high and low alike that they are divine—pure and perfect beings, blessed and eternal.

So here we see another characteristic of Swamiji’s Advaita. He severely criticised the doctrine of *adhikara*—the doctrine that this teaching should only be given to the highly qualified, that to give it to the unfit would be casting pearls before swine. It is important to recognise that Swamiji knew that only the *adhikari*—the qualified spiritual aspirant—could realise the truth in direct, transcendent experience. But he also said: ‘These conceptions of the Vedanta must come out, must remain not only in the forest, not only in the cave, but they must come out to work at the bar and the bench, in the pulpit, and in the cottage of the poor man, with the fishermen that are catching fish, and with the students that are studying. ... If the fisherman thinks that he is the Spirit, he will be a better fisherman; if the student thinks he is the Spirit, he will be a better student’ (3.245). Swamiji’s criticism of the doctrine of *adhikara* or fitness was its exclusionary element which said, this teaching should not be given to ordinary people.

This brings up another special feature of Swamiji’s Advaita. Past teachers of Advaita taught only those who sought final liberation. But Swamiji, as we have seen, said that this truth would help everyone, here and now. For that, he made Advaita dynamic.

Advaita as a final realisation is beyond all action, beyond Shakti, power, manifestation, and so there is no question of ‘dynamic Advaita’; and that is how it has been taught, as an ultimate realisation of transcendence. But when the non-dual reality is the principle manifesting through all life, when evolution—personal and

cosmic—is seen as an effort to reach higher and higher manifestations of consciousness, from the amoeba to the illumined God-person, then Advaita has become dynamic. When Swamiji says that ‘each soul is potentially divine’ and ‘the goal is to manifest this Divinity within’ (1.124, 257), Advaita has become dynamic. The Self is not only all knowledge, all bliss, all blessedness, and perfection, but also all power, all strength. Just manifest it.

Swamiji defines action, karma, thus: ‘Every mental and physical blow that is given to the soul, by which, as it were, fire is struck from it, and by which its own power and knowledge are discovered, is karma’ (1.29). This is dynamic Advaita. Hence Sister Nivedita says of Swamiji’s teaching: ‘If the many and the One be indeed the same Reality, then it is not all modes of worship alone, but equally all modes of work, all modes of struggle, all modes of creation, which are paths of realisation. No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labour is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life is itself religion’ (1.xv).

### Conclusion

In the whole of Swamiji’s *Complete Works* there is only one instance of the word *vijnana*, and there it is used in the conventional sense of ‘science’. But the state of *vijnana* was Sri Ramakrishna’s highest teaching—the state of realisation beyond samadhi. Wouldn’t Swamiji, as Sri Ramakrishna’s mouthpiece to the world, be expected to mention it?

He didn’t need to use the word, because a close reading of his works reveals that everything Swamiji taught was not just a commentary on the state of *vijnana*; but a universalising of it into the realm of everyday life. In essence, Sri Ramakrishna’s *vijnana* is that state of realisation where Brahman and Shakti are seen as the same

reality without contradiction, where the world appearance is experienced as nothing but Brahman even when it is still perceived, that state where name and form are *realised, perceived in immediate experience*, to be nothing but waves of Brahman itself, no longer a veil hiding Brahman. Swamiji brought *vijnana* to the marketplace, to the realm of practice. It is undoubtedly the last word of realisation, but Swamiji made it the first word of practice and a new foundation for the civilisation of the future. ‘We can see God everywhere. Do not seek for Him, just see Him’ (7.29).



### Notes and References

1. And the destruction that Arjuna fears in chapter one actually happens through the course of the war.
2. See Pravrajika Prabuddhaprana, *The Life of Josephine MacLeod: Friend of Swami Vivekananda* (Dakshineswar: Sarada Math, 1990), 12.
3. This is not meant in a technical sense, only in a poetic sense.
4. Swami Gambhirananda, *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 2001), 452.
5. See *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 1.11.
6. His Eastern and Western Admirers, *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2017), 413.
7. The four-fold requisites for spiritual practice are *viveka* or discernment between the eternal and the transient, *vairagya* or renunciation of the desire to enjoy this world or the next, that is, the transient, *shatsampatti* or the six disciplines that are like treasures, and *munukshutva* or the intense longing for liberation. The six disciplines are *shama* or control of the mind, keeping it from running after the senses, *dama* or control of the sense organs themselves, *uparati* or not thinking of the sense realm, *titiksha* or forbearance, *samadhana* or concentration of mind, and *shraddha* or faith. See, for example, Swamiji’s lectures ‘Steps to Realisation’ and ‘Discipleship’, *Complete Works* 1.405 and 8.106.
8. *Complete Works*, 5.71.



# Advaita in Brief

Swami Nityasthananda

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA IDENTIFIES three stages of knowledge: in the first stage, things appear to be completely different from each other—unrelated and disparate. However, close observation reveals that everything in the world is interconnected, interrelated, and interdependent. All things and beings of the whole universe are different strands of the universal ‘Web of Life’. When we go still further in our intuitive understanding, we realise that everything is one. If these stages are explained without naming them as Dvaita, Vishishtadvaita, and Advaita, perhaps, even the Dvaitin will not hesitate to accept these three stages of knowledge. It is so convincing, for ‘Knowledge is nothing but finding unity in the midst of diversity.’<sup>1</sup>

Advaita is not just monism; there are many other philosophical schools, both Eastern and Western, which are monistic in nature, upholding one ultimate reality, but consisting diversity within itself. However, Advaita can brook no diversity within its system. That is why a negative term, ‘Advaita’, meaning non-dualism, is used to indicate this philosophy. So it is Advaitic monism. Upanishadic statements like ‘*Ekameva advitīyam [brahma]*; [Brahman] alone exists without a second’<sup>2</sup>, ‘*Neha nanasti kinchana*; there is no diversity here’<sup>3</sup> are expressions of Advaitic philosophy at its highest form.

Indian philosophy speaks of three kinds of

*bheda*, difference. The first one is *vijatiya bheda*, distinctions between different categories of objects and species like table and chair, cow and horse, and the like. The second one is *sajatiya bheda*, differences within the same category of objects or species, like distinctions between different tables, or between different cows, and so on. The third one is *svagata bheda*, differences within one and the same object or living entity, like differences between leaves and branches of a tree. Advaita cannot accept any of these *bhedas*, because all *bhedas* belong to the relative world. There cannot be any room for any kind of differences in the absolute Reality, which is infinite, either temporally, *kalatah*; spatially, *deshatah*; and objectively, *vastutah*; the last one rules out any other reality other than Brahman.

If Brahman alone is real, what about the phenomenal world? Here the theory of *adhyasa* is taken recourse to, to explain the unreality of the phenomenal world. *Adhyasa* is superimposition, that is, seeing something in place of something else, say, seeing the rope as serpent. Here it is seeing Brahman as world. Seeing the serpent in place of the rope is understandable because of the similarity of the two, and both are objective reality belonging to the sensory world. However, how is it possible to superimpose the world of senses on Brahman, which is beyond the senses and the mind, and moreover, how is it possible to see the material world in a non-material Reality? Is it possible to see darkness in the light or light in the darkness? Acharya Shankara admits that it is impossible, but still it is taking place. This

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inexplicable phenomena—impossible possibility—is called *maya*.

Acharya Shankara defines *adhyasa* as: '*Adhyaso nama atasmin tad buddhibh*; seeing something in a place where it is not.'<sup>4</sup> Explaining it further he says: '*Smriti-rupah paratra purva-drishtavabhasah*; something appearing before us, which we have perceived somewhere else earlier and remained in the form of memory in the mind' (ibid.). We have seen the serpent earlier somewhere else, which remains in the mind as memory and it is projected outside when we perceive the rope, resulting in seeing the rope as serpent. So here serpent is only a mental projection on the substratum, here the rope. Similarly, the world, which is there in the mind without beginning, is projected outside and perceived as existing outside; Brahman being its substratum here, just as it happens in a dream where the world of dream within the mind is perceived as existing outside.

This superimposition is due to *avidya* or ignorance of the absolute Reality. This *avidya* not only covers the absolute Reality, but also projects the relative world in place of it. The serpent is projected outside due to our inability to see the rope as it is. Both covering of the real and projection of unreal are taking place due to *avidya*. So, ignorance is not just absence of knowledge, but it is wrong knowledge—seeing something else in place of something.

In fact, there cannot be any absence of knowledge regarding anything, for if that 'anything' is absolutely unknown, no question of ignorance about it arises. To say that 'I do not know something' is also a form of knowledge. So ignorance really means wrong knowledge, *viparyaya* or *vivarta*, but not absence of knowledge. That is why Acharya Shankara calls *adhyasa* itself as *avidya*.

How and why the Absolute becomes or



Acharya Shankara

rather appears as the relative world? Swamiji says that the question itself is illogical, for this question or any question for that matter belongs to the relative world of time, space, and causation, but the Absolute is beyond these things. So the idea of causation is not applicable to the absolute Reality. Swamiji says:

Thus we see the very question, why the Infinite became the finite, is an impossible one, for it is self-contradictory. Supposing we knew the answer, would the Absolute remain the Absolute? What is meant by the knowledge in our common-sense idea? It is only something that has become limited by our mind, that we know, and when it is beyond our mind, it is not knowledge. Now if the Absolute becomes limited by the mind, It is no more Absolute; it

has become finite. Everything limited by the mind becomes finite. Therefore, to know the Absolute is again a contradiction in terms. That is why this question has never been answered, because if it were answered, there would no more be an Absolute.<sup>5</sup>

Acharya Gaudapada calls this *ajativada*, theory of no creation. Creation means causation, that is, cause and effect relationship. That which is a cause of some effect must also be an effect of some other cause. This world is an infinite chain of cause and effect. If Brahman is the cause of this relative world, it also comes within this chain of cause and effect, thereby losing its absoluteness. Even if we say that it is the cause of this chain of cause and effect, still we are bringing it down to our level of understanding and then it is no more absolute. We cannot even say that it just willed ‘Let there be world’, for will comes after creation. The unreal is always caused by the unreal, there cannot be any causal relationship between the real and the unreal. We cannot say that rope is the cause of serpent, it is only the substratum on which the illusion of serpent takes place. Similarly, Brahman is the substratum of this illusory world, but not its cause.

The dualistic schools accept changing reality, *anitya*. But for the Advaitin, *anitya* is also *asatya*. Acharya Shankara says: ‘*Sarvo vikarah karana-vyatiरेकेना अनुपलब्धेह असन्*; all the modifications, *vikarah*, are unreal, as they do not have any existence apart from their material cause.’<sup>6</sup> For example, pots do not have independent existence apart from the clay from which they are made. Even the clay is *vikara* of something else. If this analysis is continued to its logical end, we do not get any material substance to account for the changing reality.

Swamiji explains this in his own inimitable language: ‘Take anything before you, the most material thing—take one of the most material

sciences, as chemistry or physics, astronomy or biology—study it, push the study forward and forward, and the gross forms will begin to melt and become finer and finer, until they come to a point where you are bound to make a tremendous leap from these material things into the immaterial. The gross melts into the fine, physics into metaphysics, in every department of knowledge.’<sup>7</sup>

Now the question arises who is perceiving the relative world in place of Brahman? Who is the real perceiver? Normally we understand that senses and mind are involved in the process of perception. However, these are only instruments through which perception takes place. Eyes themselves cannot see. We see the objects outside through the eyes. Who is this ‘We’? It cannot be mind, because mind only creates the mental modification, *chittavritti*, of the object perceived by the senses. To see an external object means to see its representation as a mental modification within, *chittavritti*. Who perceives that *chittavritti*? A similar question is asked by neurologists, only they replace the mind with brain. This question is answered boldly by *Kena Upanishad* thousands of years ago, declaring that the Self is the real perceiver.<sup>8</sup>

Perception and knowledge cannot be attributed to matter; they belong to the realm of conscious entity. Since the mind and the senses also are subtle matter, we have to assume some conscious entity to account for perception. It is the light of the Self or Consciousness that illumines the *chittavritti* and again the Self itself is the Seer. The light of the lamp illumines objects around it. Suppose the lamp were to be conscious of itself, it would perhaps think that ‘I am seeing the object with the help of my own light’. Similarly, the Self sees and knows everything with its own light reflected through the *buddhi*—*chidabhasa*.

In other words, what we call knowledge is nothing but the light of the Self. When we see an object

outside through our eyes, what we actually see is the light reflected through the object. Same is the case with regard to the knowledge of *chittavritti*. So, it is the Self that is being revealed through all knowledge. This reminds us of the famous statement of the *Kena Upanishad*, '*Pratibodha-viditam matam amritatvam hi vindate*, Brahman is known when one sees the Self in every state of mind or knowledge, for one attains immortality by such knowledge' (2.4). Acharya Shankara expresses the same idea through a simile: 'Knowledge shines forth through the senses even as the light of a lamp kept in a pot with many holes.'<sup>9</sup>

It is possible to doubt the existence of everything in this world. However, the denier himself cannot be denied. Who is actually the denier? This question leads to infinite regress. So we are bound to accept some conscious entity behind the subjective factor. To deny the existence of one's own self is as ridiculous as to say, 'I do not have any tongue', says Vidyaranya in his *Panchadashi*.<sup>10</sup>

If we ask some person who she or he is or what is her or his identity, one might mention one's name. But this is only a provisional sound symbol attributed to one by others, not one's real identity; and there might be others with the same name. Or suppose that person answers by telling her or his designation, even that represents the position one holds, and not what one really is. Or if one gives one's family identity, then also one is telling about one's relationship with somebody else, and not about oneself.

Whatever adjectives or special traits one may mention to identify oneself, they do not really represent oneself; one only shares them with others of similar nature. If one says that she or he is the body, the mind, or the self, we may perhaps take that person to be out of one's mind! Whatever appellation one may give as one's identity, it is not possible to zero in on something to give one's real identity. One may give one's

identity differently according to the situation that serves one's practical purpose for the time being. Nevertheless, we all feel that we have self-identity. What is it that gives this sense of self-identity, however vague it may be?

Acharya Shankara says: '*Asti kashchit svayam nityam aham pratyayalambanah, avasthatraya sakshi san panchakosha vilakshanah*; there is some absolute Entity, the eternal substratum of the consciousness of egoism, the witness of the three states, and distinct from the five sheaths or coverings.'<sup>11</sup>

Accepting the existence of the individual self beyond the psycho-physical personality, further we have to ask the question: 'Is there really any individuality at all?' The fact that the self is pure consciousness, forbid us to assume any limited existence to it confined to the psycho-physical personality, and make us think of it as all-pervasive and universal.

The subtle is more pervasive than the gross. The ice-block is spatially very limited. When it is melted, it becomes more pervasive. And further heated, it becomes still more pervasive as vapour. Different kinds of subtle radiations are more pervasive than all the gross material objects. Since the Self is subtler than the subtlest, it must be all-pervasive and universal.

Traditionally, to explain the identity of the individual self with the universal Self, Brahman, the example of akasha or ether is taken up. Since akasha is the finest matter, it cannot be confined within any enclosure, say a pot. The same akasha is not only within and without the pot, but it is pervading the clay from which the pot is made. The individuality of the akasha within the pot is an illusion created by the shape of the pot. Similarly, the individuality of the Self is due to the illusory covering of the psycho-physical entity. When one transcends this psycho-physical personality, one realises the identity of the




individual self and the universal Self. The Upanishads express this identity through *mahavakyas*, the great sentences.

In fact, there is no individuality, physically or mentally. According to Swamiji, all our physical bodies are small ripples in the infinite ocean of matter. And our minds are inseparable parts of the cosmic mind. Spiritually, of course, we are one with the universal Self. Mikhail Naimy speaks of the same idea in a different language: 'I say to you, your very flesh and bone are not the bone and flesh of you alone. Innumerable are the hands that dip with you in the same fleshpots of earth and sky whence come your bone and flesh and whither they return. ... Nor are your

thoughts the thoughts of you alone. The sea of common thought does claim them as her own; and so do all the thinking beings who share that sea with you.'<sup>12</sup>

Are there, then, three levels of reality different from each other? According to Swamiji: 'There are no such realities as a physical world, a mental world, a spiritual world. Whatever is, is one. Let us say, it is a sort of tapering existence; the thickest part is here, it tapers and becomes finer and finer. The finest is what we call spirit; the grossest, the body. And just as it is here in the microcosm, it is exactly the same in the macrocosm. The Universe of ours is exactly like that; it is the gross external thickness, and it tapers into finer and finer until it becomes God.'<sup>13</sup>

It does not exactly become God, it is always God; only what was perceived as world, is now realised as God. At the experiential level, God alone exists, and there will be nothing to be called unreal. So Advaita is an experience, not a logical philosophy. It does not depend on logic, but logic has to pay homage to it. 

## References

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2. *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 6.2.1.
3. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 4.4.20; *Katha Upanishad*, 2.1.11.
4. Acharya Shankara's introduction to *Brahma Sutra*, *Adhyasa-bhashya*.
5. *Complete Works*, 2:133.
6. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the Gita, 2.16.
7. *Complete Works*, 3:2-3.
8. See *Kena Upanishad*, 1.2.
9. Acharya Shankara, *Dakshinamurti Stotra*, 4.
10. Vidyananya, *Panchadashi*, 3.20.
11. Acharya Shankara, *Vivekachudamani*, 125.
12. Mikhail Naimy, *The Book of Mirdad* (London: Watkins, 2015), 52.
13. *Complete Works*, 2:16.

# *The One and the Many Are Not Two*

**Swami Tyagananda**

**N**O ONE KNOWS how or when ‘religion’—as we understand it—was born. But it seems reasonable to assume that it began with questions and, almost certainly, those questions were related to this world. The world, after all, is what we experience from the moment we are born. Even in the twenty-first century, when we seem to know a lot more about the world than our grandparents did, we still know very little. We have answers to most questions, but many of these answers provoke fresh questions. Every mystery that is solved opens the door to new mysteries.

About some of the basic questions—‘Who made this world?’, ‘Where did its material come from?’—we know almost nothing. We have theories aplenty, but theories, useful as they may be, are not really answers. They are, at best, intelligent guesswork in need of direct evidence and confirmation. Take this question, for instance: How did this world emerge? One of the theories is that God created this world. The exploration of how this emergence occurred, or how God created this world, led to the fleshing out of the theory in many different forms. These forms crystallised, over time and across this planet, into various religious traditions.

Each tradition defines and describes the complex relationship between God and the world, between the world and me, and between me and God. The traditions that keep these three—God,

the world, and me—forever apart belong to the dualistic, Dvaita, school of thought. Those that weave a tighter bond among these three, making them almost one but not quite, are said to belong to the qualified non-dualistic, Vishishtadvaita, school. And those that claim that the three are not really three but one, belong to the non-dualistic, Advaita, school.

Each of these schools is divided into sub-schools that provide explanations with a few minor variations. All of these formulations contain amazing insights and make for a fascinating study. Without direct experience, there is no way to verify which of these ways of thinking represents the truth fully. Every school has its staunch supporters as well as fierce critics. People generally gravitate towards the kind of thinking that resonates with their head and heart, usually more of the heart than the head, it would seem.

The most enigmatic of these three schools is the non-dualistic school, because its claim—that the ‘many’ don’t really exist—is radically contrary to our present experience. The idea sounds quite audacious if not crazy. How do they justify their claim? Simply by some commonsense observations and a remarkable ability to think outside the box. The rest of this essay is a brief statement about why the non-dualistic claim deserves to be taken seriously.

It is helpful to begin by examining our understanding of what ‘real’ means. What makes one thing real and another unreal? What is the most essential ingredient in reality? Existence seems to be the obvious answer. For a thing to be real,

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it must exist. Only if something exists will I be able to experience it. There are, however, things that I experience and yet dismiss as unreal. Take the case of dreams. I dismiss my dreams as unreal because the dream world has no stability. It didn't exist before I fell asleep and it doesn't exist after I wake up. It seems to have some kind of existence while I am dreaming, but that's all about it. That interim flash of existence, we conclude, has no real existence when we return to the 'real' world, which we see when we wake up.

This is another way of affirming that what is really real, *satya*, must also be eternal, *nitya*. A temporary reality—such as that of my dream or of a mirage in a desert—is no reality. This doesn't sound too startling until we apply this principle to the world around us. If there is no problem accepting that the dream world is not real, why should it be a problem to accept that the waking world may also not be real? The two are remarkably similar. The dream world didn't exist before I slept and it didn't exist after I woke up. The waking world didn't exist before I woke up and it doesn't exist when I sleep. The dream world exists for me only when I am dreaming and the waking world exists for me only when I am awake.

We might be tempted to say that the two are not quite the same. The world I see every morning is the world I see every day, whereas my dream world keeps changing every night. This is an obvious counterpoint but without much substance. When I enter the dream world, I never think of it as a *new* world that I am seeing for the first time. I seem to know everything and everyone in it as if the dream world had been existing all along. It never *feels* new every night, the way the waking world doesn't feel new every morning. From our experience of dreams, we know, in retrospect, that it is possible to see a new world and yet not *feel* it to be new as long

as we are in it. There is no plausible way to deny that such is not the case with regard to the waking world.

The discovery of these similarities in the waking world and the dream world may modify our understanding of the three states we experience daily: waking, *jagrat*; dream, *svapna*; and deep sleep, *sushupti*. Seeing that, like dreams, they all begin and also end, we may find ourselves admitting that there might as well be three kinds of dreams: waking dream, dream dream, and deep sleep dream.<sup>1</sup> Once the mind starts thinking along these lines, what is there to stop it from thinking of death as another dream, of the residence in heaven or hell as another dream, and of rebirth as another dream? Perhaps our entire existence is a series of seemingly endless dreams.<sup>2</sup>

'Seemingly' is the key word, for these dreams are not really endless. They do end, but only when we wake up—when we *really* wake up. It is then that we encounter the reality which is both *really* real as well as eternal. According to non-dualists, the *real* reality, distinct from the pseudo reality of this world, is indescribable.<sup>3</sup> We can only say what it is not, never what it is. We distort it the moment we try to describe it. Nevertheless, we need to have *some* word to refer to it, if we must talk about it.

The word, which is most commonly used to refer to what is really real, is 'Brahman'. It is not the name of a person or a state or of anything in particular. The word simply means vast, all-pervading. Since Brahman is infinite, it has no boundaries, no limitations of any kind, no subjugation to any laws. It cannot therefore be material. The non-dualists identify Brahman with consciousness—not in the sense of consciousness *of* something or someone, but consciousness *itself*, unattached to anyone or anything. Brahman is the real me. The human me is wandering endlessly in these cascading dream worlds. The



real me is the one who is always awake, *buddha*.

If our experiences while awake, asleep, or dreaming are seen in terms of a series of dreams, we begin to see the world in a different light. Having cast sufficient and credible doubt on the independent existence of the world, we no longer need to think of the source, or 'God,' who may have created this world. Which is not to say that God is unnecessary or has no role to play. It simply means that discussion about God can wait. What is of immediate concern is the perplexing question: if this world is a dream-like experience, *whose* experience is it? Who is asleep and who is dreaming this dream?

We know that when we sleep, our waking identity is left behind and we are, as it were, separated from ourselves and the world. As long as we are asleep, we remain unaware of our waking persona and the world. This kind of ignorance is necessary for sleep to occur and for dreams to begin. I create the dream world after I forget who I am—and I become a part of my dream world by identifying with someone in my dream as 'me'. The real me is asleep, the dream-me is doing all kinds of things in the dream world.

What would happen if Brahman—the real me—fell asleep? At first glance, the question seems preposterous. We have already identified Brahman with consciousness, one who is always awake. To imagine Brahman falling asleep is the same as imagining consciousness becoming unconscious, which is not only ridiculous but also impossible. Impossible things don't happen. If they did, they wouldn't be impossible. But they can *seem* to happen. Not really, but apparently—as in sleep. One moment I am lying in my bed, turning and tossing, and the next moment I am enveloped in the warm embrace of sleep, which gently guides me into a new world of the type I had never seen before. This transition from the waking world to the dream world is magical but

far from real. Nothing has happened really. I am still lying in my bed but I am not aware of it. I am aware of only the dream world before me. Just as the dream world doesn't really exist, Brahman doesn't really sleep. But dreams are still possible, so speculation about Brahman's sleep is also possible.

So, then, what would happen if—and that's a big, skeptical if—Brahman slept? Brahman would inevitably be separated from its identity as the divine being, as one who is infinite and complete in every way. When Brahman's infinitude is left behind, what emerges is a finite being, vulnerable, and mortal. When Brahman's completeness is left behind, what emerges is an incomplete being, filled with desire.

In Brahman's dream world, Brahman is no longer Brahman. The dream transforms the divine being into a human being. Brahman is asleep and dreams of this universe—'creates this universe', if you like—with its galaxies and its solar systems, its oceans and its mountains, its trees and its rivers, its living beings and its nonliving objects, and everything else that fills the space.<sup>4</sup> Brahman identifies with one human being in the dream, as 'me'. That's the 'me' you and I experience in our hearts all the time.<sup>5</sup>

My sense of being incomplete and never quite fulfilled forces me to do things that I hope will bring fulfillment. What they do bring is either joy or sorrow, depending on whether my action is successful or not. Nothing seems to remove my discontent totally and permanently. So I keep trying: some of my ventures turn out well, others don't. My ambition and others' expectations, my desires and others' needs, keep pushing me. I cannot stop now. It's a vicious cycle. Having fallen into the vortex of karma, I—a finite being in Brahman's dream world—continue revolving in an endless circle of alternating experience of success and failure, joy and sorrow, birth and death.



Brahman's separation from its own divine identity—even if the separation is the result of ignorance or 'sleep'—has resulted in a dream-like human identity. This is my present state of being, very real for all practical purposes unless and until I wake up. At the moment, I don't know that I am dreaming. Even when told that I am, I roll my eyes or shake my head in disbelief. The cover of ignorance is doing its job remarkably well.

When I look at the world around me, which is really Brahman's dream world, I wonder who created it. I imagine all sorts of things about the cause of this world and, unless I am a diehard

materialist, what emerges out of my thoughts is the creator God—whose love for me and for the world sustains us all, and unto whom, I tell myself, we will all return.<sup>6</sup> Is this creator God a projection of my mind? Yes and no, depending on which 'me' I am referring to. Let us remember the original premise: Brahman is asleep and dreaming. The real 'me' of Brahman is the dreamer, and the individualised and diminished 'me' of Brahman is the me in my heart at this moment.

The creator God, sensed in the dream, is obviously the projection of the 'sleeping' Brahman's mind, but so is the entire dream world including this person whom I see as me. But—and this is important—the creator God is *not* the projection of my little mind, which is why many others besides me in Brahman's dream world have also heard, imagined, and experienced the presence of the God, who cre-


ates the world and takes care of it. Moreover, prayer, worship, and meditation directed towards God produce tangible results. Which wouldn't happen if God were only a projection of my mind. God is real—as real as I am.

I am a person and, when I try to think of the source of this world, a personal God is what my mind imagines, what my heart longs for, and what my intellect can grasp. If and when my own little personhood will begin to melt, my personal God will also begin to melt. Those who talk about the impersonal reality while clinging to their own personalities can never experience the impersonal. An empty talk is just that—empty.

When I am no longer a person, my God too will no longer be a person.<sup>7</sup> My concept of God evolves as I evolve.

The beauty of the non-dualistic thought is that, even when it affirms the unity of all existence, it still has in its scheme a place for God and the world. The triad—God, the world, and me who acknowledges their presence—all belong to the same plane of reality. If we accept any one of these as real, we have to accept the other two as well.<sup>8</sup> If we question the existence of one, we are in effect also questioning the existence of the other two. What would be impossible to do, obviously, is to question the existence of the questioner.

When the focus turns to the questioner, it turns also to the relationships between me and the world, the world and God, and God and me. It is then that we discover, as seen through the analysis of dreams, that the world has no objective existence apart from me who is experiencing it. The creator God exists only as long the world seems to exist. The personal God exists only to fulfil the needs of the personal me. Looking deeply and learning from experience, the spiritual seeker realises that the three—me, the world, and God—are not really three. God and me are ‘not two’, me and the world are ‘not two’, the world and God are ‘not two’. The many and the one are not two.

No matter which school of thought—dualistic, qualified non-dualistic, or non-dualistic—provides us the tools to think and to practise, we are all like rivers wending our way to the ocean. The experience of merging into the ocean is what counts, who cares which path brings us to that ultimate and total fulfilment? 

### Notes and References

1. ‘*Tasya traya avasthatrayah svapna*; of that [the real one] there are three states of dream’, *Aitareya Upanishad*, 1.3.12.

2. ‘What we call life is a succession of dreams—dream within dream. One dream is called heaven, another earth, another hell, and so on. One dream is called the human body, another the animal body, and so on—all are dreams.’ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 9.243.
3. ‘The nature of Brahman cannot be described. About It one remains silent. Who can explain the Infinite in words? ... “Everything else but Brahman has been polluted, as it were, like food touched by the tongue.” In other words, no one has been able to describe what Brahman is.’ M., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 1980), 218.
4. ‘*Tat srishtva tadevanupravishat*; having projected the world, [Brahman] entered into it’, *Taittiriya Upanishad*, 2.6.1.
5. Brahman may identify with any living being as ‘me’ in the dream—I have limited it to human beings because they are the potential readers of this essay.
6. ‘This [the human] longing for freedom produces the idea of a Being who is absolutely free. The concept of God is a fundamental element in the human constitution.’ *Complete Works*, 1.334.
7. ‘When Prahlada forgot himself, he found neither the universe nor its cause; all was to him one Infinite, undifferentiated by name and form; but as soon as he remembered that he was Prahlada, there was the universe before him and with it the Lord of the universe—“the Repository of an infinite number of blessed qualities”. So it was with the blessed Gopis. So long as they had lost sense of their own personal identity and individuality, they were all Krishnas, and when they began again to think of Him as the One to be worshipped, then they were Gopis again’ (3.40–1).
8. The Personal God is as real as me—which is how the two of us can connect. This makes it possible to receive answers to my prayers, to make offerings when I worship, and meditate on God in my heart. Done properly, all of these things have the potential to shake me out of my illusions. The personal God leads me to Brahman, the transcendent reality.

# Advaita Vedanta: Swami Vivekananda and the Global Context

Swami Satyapriyananda

**B**ROADLY SPEAKING, there are two approaches to the study of philosophy: the Western and the Eastern. Narendranath [later Swami Vivekananda] was aware that 'most philosophical systems are only intellectual diagrams, giving no place to the emotions of man, thereby stifling his creative and responsive faculties'. So Narendra 'did not want diagrams of Truth, no matter how clever: he wanted the Truth. True philosophy should be the mother of spiritual action, the fountain-head of creative energy, the highest and noblest stimulus to the will. Short of that, it was worthless.'<sup>1</sup>

In a letter, Swami Abhedananda gives this note of warning to a devotee:

I am very glad to know that you have a desire to read Philosophy. Read copiously. If, however, you do not have realisation then you will get confused in studying Eastern and Western Philosophy. How will you ascertain which of the various doctrines is true? In the beginning I had such doubt and I became an atheist. I then stopped reading all Philosophy and started seeking the standard of truth through realisation. Afterwards through the grace of Sri Sri Thakur (Sri Ramakrishna) I found a yardstick which provided a way to put every philosophy in its proper place and then all my doubts and questions were solved.<sup>2</sup>

The Upanishad says: 'After realisation of the ultimate Truth, the strings of doubt in the heart

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are torn, all questions cease, and all fruits of action wither away.'<sup>3</sup>

The discussion in this article will therefore bring in personalities and their religious experience, as 'it is life that kindles life'.<sup>4</sup> Further, India is a nation that, all along her long history of existence, has given enormous freedom to religious life and thought so much so that there is a huge variety of philosophical literature available, from which one can choose that which suits one's taste and temperament. Suited for the present age, is the life and message of Sri Ramakrishna, the incarnation of the age, and those of his divine consort, Sri Sarada Devi, and his spiritually vibrant disciples, which have not only removed the stigma attached to religious living—that it is 'the *opium* of the people',<sup>5</sup> but also made spiritual living real, visible, meaningful, and easy of accomplishment. In addition, this treasure is scientific and suitable for thinking people all over the globe and addresses the concerns of utility and validity of spiritual living and experience. All this has contributed much to the appeal and relevance of Advaita Vedanta in the global context even today. The fruit of the pudding is in the eating. Too true and it is the community of religious practitioners who are the real ambassadors for this global movement. No wonder!

Swamiji's depth of fascination for the study of philosophy even in his young days can be gleaned from *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, by his Eastern and Western disciples:

The influence of his family ... was far-reaching in its effects. It was his mother who imbued him with the ideals of feeling nobly, thinking highly and acting rightly. [If one feels nobly, he thinks highly and this results in his acting rightly.] At her knee he gained his wide knowledge of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the two great Hindu epics, as she read them aloud to him in the twilight. [These epics are a record of the lives of great personalities who lived in the past which give clear insights into several aspects of human life.] To his father he owed his broadmindedness, manliness and respect for any genuine national tradition. His father's influence served to widen the scope of Narendra's learning by directing his attention to the cultures of other lands. This was as it should be, for, as Swami Vivekananda in the making, he needed to develop a sympathetic understanding broad enough to include all cultures and all religions. So we find Naren desirous of encompassing all knowledge, Eastern and Western, in philosophy and history, in the arts and sciences, but especially in Western philosophy. He threw himself into these studies with his usual intensity, determined to discover and master their underlying principles and value. ...

The philosophy of Herbert Spencer interested him particularly, and later on he used the Spencerian mode of reasoning in his discussion of the doctrines of the Upanishads and the Vedanta. From such study Narendra gained a power of thought, penetrating discrimination, and spirit of search for a scientific basis, that stood him in good stead when delivering his message in later years. The philosophy of Spencer is dangerous to traditional theological conceptions. It pulverises the foundations of belief itself. Only an innate idealism, and the power of a poetic and imaginative temperament, could save any part of Naren's former outlook. It was his inherent capacity for the broader vision that saved him from becoming a fatalist and atheist. The mystic was latent in him, and his spirited soul could not stop its questionings at the agnostic's half-way house. He studied the systems of

the German philosophers, particularly those of Kant and Schopenhauer. He studied also John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte, and dived into Aristotelian analysis and speculations. For a time he found satisfaction in the Positivist philosophy of Comte which embraces a wide ethical outlook. But never did his enthusiasm for exploration beguile him into accepting any newer and greater vision of Truth without subjecting it to the same keen-eyed scrutiny he had given his earlier beliefs, and comparing it with the systems of his own land.<sup>6</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna, with a view to injecting Advaitic thought into Narendra, asked him to read out to him from the *Ashtavakra Samhita* and other Advaitic texts. Narendra could not accept the Advaitic dictum that everything was God. One day going to Pratapchandra Hazra, he said: 'How can this be? This jug is God, this cup is God and we too are God: nothing can be more preposterous!' On hearing Narendra's laughter, Sri Ramakrishna, who was in his room in a state of semi-consciousness, came out and said: 'Hullo! What are you talking about?' He touched Narendra and plunged into samadhi. The effect of the touch was such that Narendra really found nothing else in the universe but God. This impression lasted for some days! Whether eating or lying down, or going to college, he had the same experience and felt himself always in a sort of trance. While walking in the streets, he noticed cabs plying, but did not feel inclined to move out of the way. He felt that the cabs and himself were of one stuff. His limbs seemed to have become paralysed. He did not relish eating, and felt as if somebody else were eating. When there was a slight change in this state, the world began to appear dream-like. While walking in Cornwallis Square, he would strike his head against the iron railings to see if they were real or only a dream. This state of things continued for some days. When he became 'normal' again, he realised that he must have had

a glimpse of the Advaita state. Then it struck him that the words of the scriptures were not false. Thenceforth, he could not deny the conclusions of the Advaita philosophy (1.97).

Another issue with Narendra was that, being a member of the Brahmo Samaj, he did not believe in the worship of images nor even in bowing before them. On the other hand, Sri Ramakrishna realised everything through the worship of images! Such a contrast! One day, it so happened that Narendra's father passed away leaving the family in huge debts. Narendra, try as he might, could not get an employment to support the family. So circumstances forced Narendra to run to Sri Ramakrishna and request him to pray to *his* Divine Mother for his sake. Sri Ramakrishna asked Narendra to pray to the Divine Mother himself and pointed out that all his problems were because of not accepting the Divine Mother. Thrice did Narendra go before the image of the Divine Mother but instead of praying for material benefit, each time he prayed, beholding the living compassionate image of the blissful Divine Mother, for knowledge, devotion, discernment, and dispassion. It leaves an indelible mark on anyone's mind that an educated Calcutta, now Kolkata, boy, who would not blindly accept anything without ascertaining the truth, accepted both the truth of Advaita and the worship of images not as idolatry but as the worship of the 'image of Consciousness'.

Towards the end of his mortal existence, Sri Ramakrishna one day called Narendra to his side and looking intently at him in his eyes, passed his spiritual power into him, saying that by the strength of that power he will do great good and that he [Sri Ramakrishna] had thereby become a fakir. By 'becoming a fakir', it should be understood that he had given Narendra all that was necessary for him to work out the mission of spreading spirituality.

Though Sri Ramakrishna praised Narendra several times in lofty terms, it is interesting to note the impression Narendra made on the mind of Professor Wright in the West who exclaimed: 'To ask you, Swami, for credentials is like asking the sun to state its right to shine!' (1.405-6). The professor was acquainted with many distinguished people who were connected with the World's Parliament of Religions at Chicago. He wrote at once to the Chairman of the Committee for the Selection of Delegates, stating: 'Here is a man who is more learned than all our learned professors put together' (1.406). Such was Swamiji! And whatever he spoke was from the depths of his personal experience and realisation, and that had a telling effect on the audience.

Swamiji is not alone in accomplishing this gigantic intellectual and spiritual feat in the galaxy of the Ramakrishna Order's first generation of monks. Swami Abhedananda, whose pre-monastic name was Kali Prasad Chandra, stands out as a master of this subject. The life of Kali reveals:

His [Kali's] desire to become a philosopher was greatly stimulated when he read for the first time in Wilson's *History of India* that Shankaracharya propounded the Advaita system of philosophy. His perusal of the Gita served only to intensify all the more his yearning to follow in the footsteps of the great Acharyas and to study their philosophies. But along with this ever-increasing thirst for acquiring spiritual wisdom, he felt as well a strong urge to widen the bounds of his intellectual knowledge by studying the masterpieces of great savants of the East and the West. Even at this tender age he finished reading not only such abstruse books as John Stuart Mill's *Logic*, *Three Essays on Religion*, Herschel's *Astronomy*, Ganot's *Physics*, Lewis' *History of Philosophy*, and Hamilton's *Philosophy*, but also the great works of Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Banabhatta, and other eminent poets of India, a fact which gives ample evidence of his prodigious intellect and extraordinary genius.

His intellectual allegiance was not confined to any particular school of thought. He developed even at an early age a remarkable sympathy for all faiths. That is why we find him so intently listening to the illuminating lectures delivered by the distinguished leaders and exponents of Christianity, Brahmoism, and Hinduism. In 1882–83, he attended a series of public lectures delivered by the noted Hindu philosopher, Shashadhar Tarkachudamani, on the six systems of Hindu philosophy. He was deeply impressed when he heard his pregnant discourse on the Yoga system of Patanjali and learnt about the infinite possibilities of the human soul. Thenceforth he made a special study of some of the most authoritative books on the subject of yoga and felt a strong desire to practise Yoga.<sup>7</sup>

One day he expressed a desire to learn the *Yoga Aphorisms* of Patanjali from him [Shashadhar], but Shashadhar told Kali that he had no time and referred him to another renowned scholar, Kalibar Vedantavagish. Kali's desire to learn the scriptures was phenomenal. He went to Vedantavagish, who was then translating Patanjali's *Yoga Aphorisms* from Sanskrit into Bengali. Vedantavagish told Kali that he had no spare time to teach him the *Yoga Sutras*; but he could explain the *sutras* to him in the mornings while his attendant gave him an oil massage before his bath. Kali began to visit the pandit every morning; while he read the aphorisms, the pandit would explain them. Thus he completed his study of yoga philosophy. Kali then bought a copy of *Shiva Samhita* and learned the disciplines of hatha yoga, kundalini yoga, pranayama, and raja yoga. He had a desire to be absorbed in samadhi through *khechari mudra*, a special technique of hatha yoga; but he was told not to practise any of the methods described in hatha yoga treatises without being properly instructed by a competent yogi.<sup>8</sup>

The boy now began to search for a suitable teacher who would make him a *real* yogi and teach him how to attain to the *Nirvikalpa Samadhi*, the crowning glory of man's spiritual



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experiences. ... Sri Ramakrishna was overjoyed to hear the words of the boy and said, 'You were a great Yogi in your previous birth. This is your last birth. I shall initiate you into the mysteries of yoga practices.'<sup>9</sup>

Years later, while at the Baranagore monastery, Kali used very often to shut himself up in his own room for intense spiritual practices and study of Vedanta and Western Philosophy which evoked the admiration of all and earned for Kali the epithets, "Kali Tapasvi" (the ascetic Kali)' and 'Kali Vedanti' Kali, the Vedantin (244).

On 27 October 1896, Abhedananda gave his maiden speech before the learned audience of the Christo-Theosophical Society at Bloomsbury Square in London. Swamiji was highly pleased and said: 'Even if I perish on this plane, my message will be sounded through these dear lips and the world will hear it.'<sup>10</sup>

Swami Ramakrishnananda, Shashi, also deserves special mention. It was in Chennai that Swamiji first intimated to eager listeners his plan of campaign. Some of the citizens approached Swamiji with the request that he should kindly send one of his brother-disciples to stay in Chennai and establish a monastery which would





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become the centre of the religious teachings and philanthropic activities outlined by him in his addresses delivered in India and abroad. By way of reply, Swamiji said: 'I shall send you one who is more orthodox than your most orthodox brahmins of the South and who is at the same time incomparable in performing worship, scriptural knowledge, and meditation on God.'<sup>11</sup> The very next steamer from Kolkata to Chennai brought Ramakrishnananda.

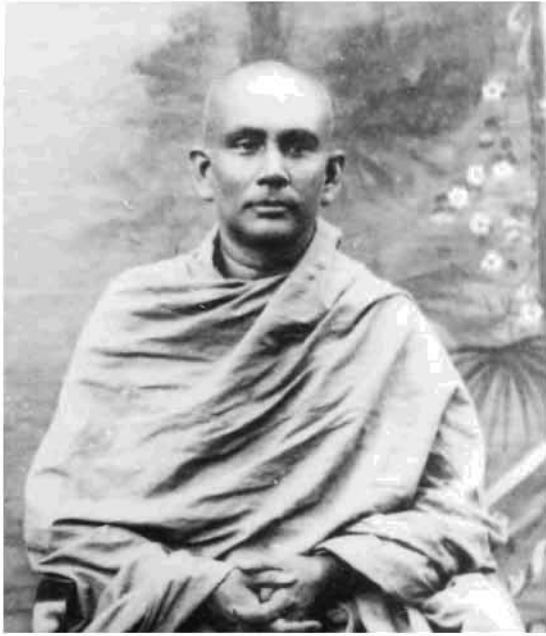
Swami Turiyananda, Hari, is yet another distinguished disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. Swamiji had a great admiration for this brother-disciple. In a letter from America he wrote in 1895: 'Whenever I think of the wonderful renunciation of Hari, about his steadiness of intellect and forbearance, I get a new access of strength.'<sup>12</sup> At San Francisco, Swamiji told the students: 'I have only talked, but I shall send you one of my brethren who will show you how to live what I have taught.'<sup>13</sup> Their expectation was more than fulfilled for in Swami Turiyananda they found a living embodiment of Vedanta. In 1911 he developed diabetes which began to increase with



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the passing of years. He got carbuncle on his back for which he had to be operated several times. In none of the operations did he allow himself to be under chloroform. He had such a wonderful capacity to dissociate his mind from the body-idea. It was this swami of great erudition and spiritual attainment who declared as life was ebbing out: 'Brahman is real. The world is real. The world is Brahman. The life-force is established in Truth.'<sup>14</sup>

Swami Saradananda, Sharat, was another accomplished disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. He undertook the tantrika form of spiritual practice being initiated into the practices by Ishvar Chandra Chakravarty, his uncle and the father of Shashi. The goal of the tantrika discipline is to see the Divine Mother in all. That he succeeded in this can be understood from what he wrote in the dedication of his illuminating Bengali book, *Bharate Shakti Puja*, 'Mother Worship in India': 'The book is dedicated with great devotion to those by whose grace the author has been blessed with the realisation of the special manifestation of the Divine Mother in every woman on earth.'<sup>15</sup>



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Sri Ramakrishna had once asked him: 'How would you like to realise God? What divine visions do you prefer to see in meditation?' Sharat had replied: 'I do not want to see any particular form of God in meditation. I want to see Him as manifested in all creatures of the world. I do not like visions.' Sri Ramakrishna smiled and told him in reply: 'That is the last word in spiritual attainment. You cannot have it all at once.' The response to this was: 'But I won't be satisfied with anything short of that. I shall trudge on in the path of religious practice till that blessed state arrives' (173). Once an attendant asked Swami Saradananda casually what he had attained spiritually. At another time Sharat told this very attendant that 'whatever he had written in *Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga* about spiritual things, he had experienced directly in his own life' (193). And in that book he has at places delineated the highest experiences of spiritual life!

Let us consider the expression, 'spiritualising everyday life'. We get from Swami

Trigunatitananda, Saradaprasanna, how to convert even a mundane lecture session into spiritual activity. A lesson or a lecture was 'to be taken sincerely as a spiritual service and religious practice for one's own spiritual advancement'. In preparing themselves, the students were to 'meditate that the grace of God was being conferred on the subject, that it was being sanctified by the divine touch'. The subject was to be received through prayer and at the time of delivery, the speaker was to remember that he was 'talking to God, that God was the only audience'.<sup>16</sup>

(To be continued)

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14. *God Lived with Them*, 392.
15. *The Disciples of Sri Ramakrishna*, 177.
16. *God Lived with Them*, 509–10.



## ***Visions of Advaita Vedanta***

**Swami Kritarthananda**

**S**RI RAMAKRISHNA SAYS:

Once a man entered a wood and saw a small animal on a tree. He came back and told another man that he had seen a creature of a beautiful red colour on a certain tree. The second man replied: 'When I went into the wood, I also saw that animal. But why do you call it red? It is green.' Another man who was present contradicted them both and insisted that it was yellow. Presently others arrived and contended that it was grey, violet, blue, and so forth and so on. At last they started quarrelling among themselves. To settle the dispute they all went to the tree. They saw a man sitting under it. On being asked, he replied: 'Yes, I live under this tree and I know the animal very well. All your descriptions are true. Sometimes it appears red, sometimes yellow, and at other times blue, violet, grey, and so forth. It is a chameleon. And sometimes it has no colour at all. Now it has a colour, and now it has none.'<sup>1</sup>

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This is a well-known illustration cited very often by the Vedanta teachers in explaining the inexplicable nature of God. Each person describes God after his own conception. In this simile the person living below the tree is the Vedantin who clearly knows that the visions of all the contenders are partially true. In fact, the 'thing' all of them saw would at times assume no hue at all, that is, exist beyond all truths also.

### ***A Great Riddle***

To all ordinary levels of intellect or reasoning, Advaita Vedanta is the most complicated philosophy among all the six systems in Indian philosophy. Not only from the standpoint of reasoning, but also in points of conclusion, the Advaita system excels all other philosophies. To a beginner, the final verdict of Advaita reasoning seems really weird, outlandish. Readers of Swami Vivekananda's life are well acquainted with the fact how, in his younger days when he came to Sri Ramakrishna and construed the latter's saying as

'God pervades all,' he burst into laughter with his friends on that issue. He was also a keen seeker of God, albeit a beginner. And although a simple 'divine touch' of the Master metamorphosed the whole world before his eyes instantaneously into an undivided single Existence, Swamiji's body and mind were not mature enough at that time to hold that ineffable realisation. That being the case with a spiritual stalwart like Swamiji, whom Sri Ramakrishna addressed at the first sight as Rishi Nara reborn, it is needless to say how riddling it is to all other intellectual minds.<sup>2</sup>

But the scenario radically changed in later years. Swamiji realised the truth of that great conclusion of Advaita Vedanta to its very depth. The realisation made him all the more spontaneous, so much so that in every dealing with his close friends, even when he was in a lighter mood, he continued to give out that truth. In a poetic way, once he jotted down some stanzas depicting the song of the free to Mary Hale, one of the daughters in the Hale family. The last stanza ran thus:

From dreams awake, from bonds be free,  
Be not afraid. This mystery,  
My shadow, cannot frighten me,  
Know once for all that I am He.<sup>3</sup>

Sister Mary could not catch the deep significance of it. So she replied in another poem: 'For you have made them clearly see / The one main truth that "all is He"' (8.165).

In reply Swamiji proceeded to convey the truth:

So Mary Hale,  
Allow me tell,  
You mar my doctrines wronging, baulking.  
I never taught  
Such queer thought

That all was God—unmeaning talking!

But this I say,

Remember pray,

That God is *true*, all else is *nothing*,

This world's a dream

Though true it seem,

And only truth is *He* the living!

The real *me* is none but *He*,

And never, never *matter* changing! (8.166).

This is exactly the conclusion of Advaita Vedanta: God is *true*, all else is *nothing*, and not that 'all is God'. But this difference between the two phrases is so subtle as to be lost to the ordinary intellect. When one says that only God is true, none else exists, it emphasises that God only exists—not the visible universe; but when it is said that 'all is God', emphasis goes to 'all'—and not to God. That is why to the realised soul this phrase becomes 'unmeaning talking'.

### **Cracking a Riddle**

A novice in the Vedanta studies will first find oneself surrounded from all sides by the mist of such riddles. Vedanta may be called a diary of spiritual realisations of various wise persons of ancient India. It was impossible for them to narrate every phase of realisation verbatim, because narration is possible only within the range of the sense world, while the Vedantic realisation takes an aspirant beyond sense-organs, mind, and so on.<sup>4</sup> Those realised sages honestly confessed their inability to describe that with all exactitude. No worldly illustration would suffice to indicate precisely that reality. Can one see one's eyes without a mirror or some other medium? Still, as far as their organ of speech went, they tried to give a verbal sketch of their visions in the form of worldly similes.

For example, one of the Upanishads says: 'It moves, yet it moves not; it is near, yet far; it exists in the innermost core of all, as also it covers everything outside.'<sup>5</sup> Statements like this are rife throughout the Vedanta literature. A novice cannot but find in these apparently contradictory truths, a source of fun or at most a riddle. But to the expert eye, it all is nothing but truth. Vedanta is full of visions that can bring us great bliss in life. When one succeeds in cracking an age-old riddle, one becomes immensely full of bliss. To put it in the other way, as soon as one cracks a riddle, one discovers a vision of Vedanta.

As a matter of fact, Vedanta is a subject full of visions made by the sages of yore. Some of these visions are being put below. They help humankind solve all problems in this worldly life that cause misery. After discussing them in brief, we will discuss their utility in human society in respective turns.

### **Vision 1: Scientific Outlook of Vedanta**

A special trait of Vedanta is its scientific approach in all walks of life. It stands on the firm foundation of reason plus realisation in addition to scriptural support. Let us take an example from life. We all hear such moral advice from elders and well-wishers, 'Do not steal others' possessions, do not harm others', and the like. All religions corroborate this teaching of being moral. But the moment anyone raises the question 'why' against such advice, no other religion but Vedanta can withstand the shock with the answer: 'Because others are none but your own self, your own reflection; by harming others one harms oneself.'

Here, it is noteworthy that no incurring of sin is mentioned, no threat of hellfire that weakens one's mind. Isn't it a scientific approach? In this context the word 'scientific' means a firm basis of logic or reason. Whereas the other religions

are based on unconditional faith, obedience, belief in scriptures, teachers, and the like. Vedanta straightaway points to the truth. Swamiji advised the parents and guardians of children: 'Do not teach these things [fearful ideas] to others through fear of society and public opinion ... What is there to be taught more in religion than the oneness of the universe and faith in one's self?'<sup>6</sup> In fact, it is scientific reasoning with its positive approach that dispels all fears.

Besides, Vedantic teaching allows an aspirant to make a full experiment in a laboratory when it is called for. To illustrate this, the *Chhandogya Upanishad* presents many such examples. In one of them the Master asks the disciple to bring a glass of water, add a spoon of salt to it, and stir it. After the disciple does so, he is asked to taste the glass-water from the top, middle, and the bottom portion successively. The disciple obeys and reports the nature of the taste as equally saline everywhere. But the brine water being saturated, there was no trace of salt seen anywhere. From this phenomenon, the preceptor concludes that Brahman is in the same way 'saturated' everywhere in the universe. In fact, there was nothing else than Brahman. Brahman is both immanent and transcendent. This means Brahman is beyond nature as well as present intrinsically in it like the thread all over the cloth. A cloth cannot be imagined without thread.

Similarly, in order to demonstrate how the physical body, *annamaya*, affects the pranic body, *pranamaya*, as well as the mental body, *manomaya*, one Master bids the disciple to gradually reduce his food intake in fifteen instalments until on the last day he has to go without food, and on each day of such reduction, he asks the disciple to repeat whatever Vedic text he had learnt earlier. The disciple felt the gradual reduction of his memory power until on the last day he could not remember anything at all. Then,

day by day for fifteen days he is allowed to take one morsel more than the previous day until on the last day he eats to his fill; and the disciple was again able to reproduce as before all the Vedic texts he learnt. What experiment can be more logical and reasonable than the ones cited herein? Are these in any way inferior to laboratory experiments? Thus, it is established that Vedantic outlook is scientific.

What is the practical utility one gets from this vision? It is that religion as explained through Vedanta is actually a combination of religion and science, and carries science to the limits that science alone cannot reach. People will discover that science and religion are compatible with each other and that religion does not consist in doctrines or dogmas or blind belief, or mere faith in holy books, or on persons with supernatural power. The wrong notion about the abstruseness or complication in religious understanding will be dispelled once for all, and more and more people will take to religion as an indispensable necessity of life.

### **Vision 2: Triumph of Truth Alone**

Vedanta boldly declares that truth is the beginning and end, the alpha and omega of spiritual life. It is one of the prime requisites through which one can ascend the mansion of spirituality. The *Mundaka Upanishad* boldly proclaims this very fact: 'Truth alone triumphs, not falsehood. The path to divinity lies through the path of truth alone.'<sup>7</sup> To uphold this lofty principle Vedanta posits innumerable stories from life demonstrating how far an aspirant should sacrifice everything for the sake of truth. We come across the anecdote of the truthful Satyakama Jabala of uncertain parentage in the *Chhandogya Upanishad*. At the age of five the boy went to the hermitage of a sage to live there as a student. As the preceptor enquired of his lineage the boy spoke

out the unshielded truth even risking humiliation from his fellow friends. But the Master felicitated him saying that only a brahmana boy can speak out such a bald truth that is damaging to himself.

Later, he was entrusted the task of tending five hundred cows of the hermitage to the wilderness and not to return until their number swelled to double. The boy was left alone in the company of the cows, served them with unflinching devotion and love, and at long last an unearthly voice spoke through a bull addressing the boy, thereby imparting him a part of the supreme knowledge. In succession, a bird and other animals also imparted the rest of the knowledge to the boy. Actually, it was his purified heart that took the role of various creatures in the outside world who taught him the truth. At last when the boy returned to the Master the latter exclaimed at one glance, 'My son, your face shines like a realised soul!'<sup>8</sup> This anecdote gives a clear picture highlighting the fact that a brahmana's greatest possession is truthfulness under all circumstances. Empowered by truth the aspirant can reach the goal.

The *Katha Upanishad* also cites the story of a fearless boy of eight years who dared to go to meet the king of death, Yama, to know the truth. With its characteristic boldness Vedanta launches therein the age-old, eternal, existential question of humanity in the form of a dialogue between the little prudent boy Nachiketa and the king of death. The boy asked: 'Some people say that the soul endures even after death, while some say that it does not. Can you teach me the secret of this?'

This is a timeless question that assails every human being from the very dawn of civilisation. No other question has ever been asked a greater number of times; no other question is so inseparably connected with our existence. Whenever we see our near and dear ones die, this existential question springs up from within





our hearts, 'Where do the departed go?' But the next moment our minds are swept away in pursuit of other cares of life and we forget that important question.

Thus, the greatest truth of life remains unanswered to the common folk. But Nachiketa was made of a distinct nature. The king of death felt that Nachiketa had asked the greatest question in the world. The answer was with the king of death, but was the student ready to grasp it? Was the question a genuine one or just a freak of the fleeting mind? Was he ready to renounce all desires of the world for that one Truth? So it was time for Yama to test the grit of the student, and he started tempting the student with a number of wants one can covet in this life—name, fame, power, long-life, enjoyment, and

so on. But Nachiketa was quite introspective and wisely rejected all those offers just for the sake of that ultimate knowledge for which he was hankering.

Here we get a very developed idea of renunciation and Vedic morality that until one has conquered the desire for enjoyment, Truth will not shine upon him. So long as the vain desires of our senses are clamouring inside and dragging us outwards every moment, the Truth will not come to our hearts. Vedanta is uncompromising in this respect. Thus, truth is both the end and the means in the visions of Vedanta.

Thus, the second vision will convince people to embrace truth so as to solve one's existential problem, an unavoidable necessity to live this life, stick to a new undertaking with steadfastness, and boldly approach new ventures in life in the face of all obstructions and threats.

### **Vision 3: Fearlessness**

Vedanta is that sort of a religion which, in the language of Swamiji, 'does not depend upon books or teachers or prophets or saviours, and that which does not make us dependent in this or in any other lives upon others'.<sup>9</sup> That is why he further reiterates: 'There is no question of believing. ... Believe nothing and disbelieve everything—that is the first step. Dare to be a rationalist. Dare to follow reason wherever it leads you' (9.215). In other words, the Vedantic message exhorts everybody to become fearless. The moment one believes everything without question, fear sneaks into his personality.

The great *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* narrates one such story in which the aspirant, even after renouncing everything for the sake of delving into the greatest truth of life, evinces fear at one point of a dialogue between a couple, Yajnavalkya and his wife Maitreyi. Fear does not leave one easily, it being an existential problem



of all living beings. When Yajnavalkya confided to his wife of his desire to renounce the world after equally distributing all his wealth between her and another wife Katyayani, Maitreyi said: 'What shall I do with that which cannot give me immortality?' Yajnavalkya became immensely pleased with his wife and proceeded to impart her the ultimate knowledge about the Truth. He proceeded step by step towards that end.

At the last stage of advice as Yajnavalkya said that the individual consciousness loses its separateness from the supreme Consciousness and merges in the latter, Maitreyi said she felt confused by the statement since she was scared to lose her individuality which means extinction. In reply, Yajnavalkya said that it was her misconception. One does not become extinct after merging in pure Consciousness. One rather attains immortality thereby. A raindrop falls in the ocean; seeing the vastness of the ocean it cries out: 'Oh no, I am dying.' Does it actually die, or gets merged in the whole? This knowledge of oneness with the whole makes one fearless, bold, and immortal.

The phenomenon of death is always an intriguing question to us all. What attitude does Vedanta have towards this event of death? According to Vedanta, death means the dissolution of the body; the body will go back to its original state of matter called the five elements. But the sum total of the actions remains undestroyed in its subtle form. Each work we do, each thought we think produces an impression, called in Sanskrit 'samskara,' upon the mind; and the sum total of all these impressions becomes a tremendous force called character. Thus, the character of every person is the resultant force of all actions one has committed.

Accordingly, one takes birth again in places or surroundings suitable for one's progress towards

freedom. In the language of Vedanta, this human birth is another chance to use up all the effects of karma to become liberated from this unending and painful cycle of birth and death. A person creates his own destiny. A good karma yields good result, while a bad karma creates bad result. But one cannot say with all certainty that a good karma yields only good effect. The fact is that there are always mixed results involved in all types of work. This has been declared by Sri Krishna in the Bhagavadgita: 'All endeavours, good or bad, are covered with evil like fire covered by smoke.'<sup>10</sup>

Then what is the way out? The way out is the way in, that is, to dwell on the inner self and do everything for its sake. This technique to convert all works into a way to freedom has been specially named by Sri Krishna as *buddhi-yoga*. It is a modified form of karma yoga. It needs only a threefold change in our attitude: towards our own selves, towards the world, and towards the work in hand. All work can be divinised through such attitude. What good result does such attitude fetch? It encourages one to think confidently in the lines laid down beautifully by Swamiji: 'You must always remember that each word, thought, and deed, lays up a store for you and that as the bad thoughts and bad works are ready to spring upon you like tigers, so also there is the inspiring hope that the good thoughts and good deeds are ready with the power of a hundred thousand angels to defend you always and for ever.'<sup>11</sup> It is just a corroboration of Acharya Shankara's message in his memorable commentary on the Gita that bears mention in this context: 'As there is the possibility of the persistence of sins which were incurred in the past but have not yet commenced yielding results, similarly there can be the possibility of the persistence of virtues which have not yet begun bearing fruits.'<sup>12</sup>

So, the third vision of fearlessness gives one the impetus to give up forever age-old superstitions in the name of religion. It is seen that when people meet with success, they feel delighted and claim all credit to themselves. But when faced with repeated failure and threatened with nature's frown, they become pessimistic and accept it all as the result of his past sins. This attitude in its turn brings in utter disappointment and depression. But the moment one learns that this world 'is a great gymnasium in which you and I, and millions of souls must come and get exercises, and make ourselves strong and perfect',<sup>13</sup> all deluded concepts of fate and destiny will take to heels. The aspirant will then muster up all courage to brave through all obstacles, showing the courage to be human.

#### **Vision 4: The Potential Divinity of the Soul**

The one great idea that comes out through masses of superstition in every country and in every religion is the momentous conclusion that the human being is divine, that divinity is our real nature. Whatever else comes to us is, in the language of Vedanta, mere superimposition. This inherent divinity has to be called out, and it will work itself out. We have just to seek, and it will manifest itself. All the schools of Vedanta are unanimous in this one matter. They believe that there is an ultimate spiritual reality called Brahman, which forms the substratum of the universe and of all individual souls. However, the schools differ in matters of the nature of Brahman and its relationship with the individual souls. They agree on the point that every soul is a part or reflection of Brahman. This knowledge of one's real nature either remains covered by ignorance or is contracted. The evil or bad element in every individual is not one's soul or Atman, but the

impure mind. This is the central idea of all the schools of Vedanta.

This doctrine of Vedanta has also immense practical value in human life. Firstly, it gives a new definition of religion. The word 'religion' is very difficult to define. Semitic religions mean by it the absolute rule of the world by a supernatural being called God. The Sanskrit word for religion is 'dharma'. This word gives a wide range of meanings. Kanada, the founder of the Vaisheshika school, defines the word 'dharma' as 'that through which *abhyudaya*, material prosperity, and *nishshreyasa*, spiritual emancipation, are attained'.

According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, religion implies well-being, meaning the activity of the soul's powers in accordance with reason. It can be achieved by the balanced use of the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic powers of person. This is exactly what the word *abhyudaya* conveys in the Indian context. And *nishshreyasa* means total freedom from all bondage including, not only gross sensual desires, but also the subtle desires for name, fame, and the like. Swamiji defined religion as the 'manifestation of the Divinity already in man' (4.358). Here by the word 'Divinity' he meant Brahman, which is inseparable from the individual self or Atman.

In the second place, this potential divinity of the soul gives a new existential philosophy of life. Vedanta does not believe in the concept of sin, which is 'a standing libel on human nature' (1.11). Swamiji went one step further and cried out: 'Blessed are my sins. Through sin I have learned virtue. It is my sins, as much as my virtues, that have made me what I am today. And now I am the preacher of virtue. Why do you dwell on the weak side of man's nature? Don't you know that the greatest blackguard often has some virtue that is wanting in the saint?'<sup>14</sup> What an invigorating exhortation! Even a dead person

will perhaps stand up and start walking on his own, enlivened by such message. So this idea of potential divinity of the soul gives a person the strength to overcome all weakness.

Life is not a prison but a battlefield, and every person has within oneself enough strength to come out of it victorious. Vedanta makes use of the psychological phenomenon 'what we think we become'.<sup>15</sup> The remedy for weakness is not brooding over it but thinking of strength. This will help one solve the existential problems of life. Vedanta says that the only prayer we should have is: 'I am not under the sway of any superstition; I am Existence-Knowledge-Bliss absolute; I am the blissful One.' This is the only way to reach the goal, to tell ourselves as well as to everyone else that we all are divine. As we go on repeating this, strength will come. Gradually this truth will take possession of our hearts and course through our veins. Then all delusion will vanish, loads of ignorance will vanish, all goodness will come to such a soul when it wakes up to that consciousness.

In the third place, this idea of potential divinity also gives a new philosophy of work. In spite of Sri Krishna's masterly exposition in the Gita, Hinduism had never developed a comprehensive philosophy of work even as a means, much less as a goal. Work was considered at most a dispensable first step in the spiritual path. The Mimamsa philosophers had their work philosophy just on the basis of Vedic rituals, which they meant by the word 'karma'. Swamiji took hints from the teachings of the Gita and included even the secular activities of a person in the concept of karma yoga. He made no distinction between the sacred and the secular. According to Sister Nivedita, in Swamiji's views, 'To labour is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life is itself religion. To have and to hold is as stern a trust as to quit and to avoid. ... To him, the

workshop, the study, the farmyard, and the field are as true and fit scenes for the meeting of God with man as the cell of the monk or the door of the temple' (1.xv).

In fine, this doctrine of intrinsic divinity of the Self saves all souls from self-alienation, feeling of uncreative, listless life, and meaninglessness. When one discovers one's real source of existence, it becomes a channel for the expression of glory and power of the Atman. Then life will also appear meaningful and worth living. The Atman is full of glory, power, and purity. If everyone believes that all power is within, one can do anything and everything. People of the West have gained much by developing confidence in their inherent power. Not only so, but a person will also elevate in moral and ethical standards by this doctrine.

But how can this idea of potential divinity enter all the strata of the society in general? Swamiji himself gave out the answer:

These conceptions of the Vedanta must come out, must remain not only in the forest, not only in the cave, but they must come out to work at the bar and the bench, in the pulpit, and in the cottage of the poor man, with the fishermen that are catching fish, and with the students that are studying. They call to every man, woman, and child, whatever be their occupation, wherever they may be. The way has been shown. ... If the fisherman thinks that he is the Spirit, he will be a better fisherman; if the student thinks that he is the Spirit, he will be a better student. If the lawyer thinks that he is the Spirit, he will be a better lawyer, and so on (3.245).

This is the utility of this fourth vision.

### ***Vision 5: Principle of Harmony of Religions***

Another salient feature of the Vedantic vision is its principle of harmony. Vedanta gives this

unique message that we must allow the infinite variation in religious thought and not try to bring everybody to the same opinion. The goal of life according to Vedanta is direct spiritual experience, *aparoksha anubhuti*. This concept of the common goal of life tends to foster the spirit of harmony, because the proof of one religion depends upon the proof of all the others. Vedanta accepts three degrees of reality: *Vyavaharika*, empirical; *Pratibhasika*, apparent; and *Paramarthika*, absolute. This view of reality had formed the backdrop of all creative activities in ancient India.

Acharya Shankara gave this doctrine a philosophical basis with his theory of non-dual nature of consciousness. In modern times, the practical significance of this approach in the field of religion was Sri Ramakrishna's discovery. By practising the spiritual disciplines in various religious paths, he came to the conclusion that they all lead to super-sensuous experiences of bliss and fulfilment. Hence, each is equally true. This idea can set at rest all controversies among the various sects in Hinduism, thus bringing about the integration of Hinduism. Not only so, but it will bring harmony among the religions of the world too.

Along with the principle of harmony of religions, Vedanta also envisions another principle called the principle of harmony of science and religion. We have already discussed this point in brief in the beginning of this article. Yet, some more points are necessary to mention here for clarity of understanding. The term 'science' is used in two senses. (a) It means the scientific method which consists of accurate collection of facts, their classification, and the discovery of their interrelationship based on unbiased judgement and experiment. (b) It is used to denote the corpus of systematic knowledge, including hypothesis, theories, and laws, concerning the physical universe.

Vedanta has no difficulty in accepting the accuracy of scientific methods, and its authority over the *vyavaharika*, empirical, truths of the physical universe. But regarding the *paramarthika*, absolute truth, Vedanta is independent of empirical beliefs and follows the subjective methods of enquiry and deep introspection called *dhyana* and *nididhyasana*, leading finally to direct realisation. As a result, Vedanta does not clash with the scientific method. Both deal with different planes of reality and have different criteria of truth. Science does not derive its authority from Vedanta, nor does Vedanta derive its authority from science. Both are independent disciplines but they supplement each other in giving the total picture of truth.

This principle of harmony has two important practical applications: interreligious understanding and the creation of a universal religion. The former is vitally necessary today for communal harmony, which is a major socio-political problem in today's world. The concept of universal religion is based on three principles. The first is the principle of direct experience; the second principle says that universal religion can be created only by accepting the best elements of all the religions. Each religion has made a special contribution to world culture and these contributions must become the universal property of all. The third principle underlying universal religion is that it should suit the different temperaments of peoples.

### **Vision 6: Unity in Diversity**

Vedanta tries to find out the ultimate unity of things in the midst of all diversity. It is expressed in this interrogative way: 'What is that by knowing which everything else is known?'<sup>16</sup> Every science, all human knowledge, is based upon finding unity in the midst of diversity. Nearly every chapter in the Upanishads starts with

dualistic teaching, *upasana*. God is first taught as someone who is the creator of this universe, its preserver, and unto God everything goes at last. God is the one to be worshipped, the ruler, the guide of nature, external and internal, yet appearing as if God were outside of nature and external. One step further, and we find the same teacher teaching that this God is not outside of nature, but immanent in nature. And at last both ideas are discarded, and the conclusion is: whatever is real is God; there is no difference. '*Tattvamasi*; you are that.'<sup>17</sup>

There is no compromise, no fear of others' opinion. Bold truth has been taught in bold language. This boldness is one of the characteristics of Vedanta. It declares openly: 'This Atman cannot be reached by mere oratorical skill, not by the power of intellect, nor even by the study of the scriptures.'<sup>18</sup> No other religion dares to say that Truth cannot be reached merely by the study of scriptures, because they are either scripture-based or personality-based. As we have already mentioned before, this boldness is one of the signal visions of Vedanta.

This principle of unity in diversity points to another cardinal tenet of Vedanta, namely, the basic solidarity of the universe. This solidarity or oneness of the universe is apparent at all levels of existence—material, mental, social, and spiritual. At the material level, science has discovered the whole universe as one mass, one ocean of matter, in which we all, the sun and the moon, and everything else are but the names of different whirlpools. Mentally speaking, it is one universal ocean of thought in which we are similar little whirlpools. And as spirit, it moves not, changes not. It is the one unchangeable, unbroken, homogeneous Atman. To put it in another way, the whole universe, in spite of all its diversity, is one in the supreme Spirit that pervades everything. This



immanence of the spirit proves the solidarity of the universe.

From the moment we learn to make this principle of solidarity our own property, all sense of hatred and jealousy towards each other will vanish altogether. Even caste problems can be freed from its sinister effect of disparity in privilege. In practical life, if privilege cannot be completely avoided, let the lower class people get more chances, more facilities than the higher ones. The latter have been enjoying till now so much of privilege at the cost of their less-privileged fellow beings. So, to keep the balance, let the circle be turned the other way round. Swamiji said in this context: 'Let the poor fellow enjoy himself a little, and then he will raise himself up, and renunciation will come to him of itself.'<sup>19</sup> These are some of the practical utilities of the sixth vision of Vedanta.


### Vision 7: Principle of Direct Experience

In this short discourse, we limit our scope within only seven visions among many others, which Vedanta points to the posterity for its all-round welfare. This is only the last of those seven visions we intend to put herein.

In the spiritual history of the world, Swamiji for the first time made direct experience, *anubhuti*, the sole test and criterion of the validity of religious truths. Before him the earlier mystics restricted mysticism to minor movements and groups. Swamiji made mysticism the main current of religion and showed that everyone can and should attain superconscious experience, and thereby become a prophet, a seer, in one's own right. In other words, he said that transcendental truth can be realised by everybody. This proposition at once refutes the mistaken notion that Vedanta is esoteric, *rahasya-vidya*, fit for only a limited few; and on the other, it infuses great mental strength in an aspirant. The new idea then dawns upon one's mind that one need not have to depend helplessly on any other people for welfare.

In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* the sage Yajnavalkya exhorts: '*Atma va are drashtavyah shrotavyo, mantavyo, nididhyasitavyah*'; this Atman has to be realised by listening to the scriptural verdicts, pondering over them, and later meditating and relating them to one's own life.<sup>20</sup> If one fills oneself with the thought of one's almightiness, one's majesty and glory, then all one's actions will be magnified, transformed, and deified by the very power of that thought. And against the wrong notion that Vedanta is the personal property of a handful of brahmana priests, Vedanta itself exhorts that this truth can be realised by each individual, and that each one of us can become rishis or seers. This will free a person from the clutches of the priest-class and prevent one from having recourse to sorcerers,

magicians, or astrologers. One need not believe whatever the priest says if one realises the truth for oneself.

Swamiji wanted to propagate a religion that will be equally acceptable to all minds. It must be equally philosophic, jnana; equally emotional, bhakti; equally mystic, dhyana; and equally conducive to action; karma. The Vedantic visions mentioned above point to the fact that such a religion is already there in Vedanta. Even in this age of globalisation and consumerism, the Vedantic concepts will shower in torrents the elixir of life with a completely new outlook. 

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## ***Advaita Vedanta: ‘Living, Poetic in Everyday Life’—Swami Vivekananda’s Comprehensive Vision***

**Swami Atmapriyananda**

**T**HE FOLLOWING THREE remarkable statements by Swami Vivekananda in regard to his ‘life’s work’, his mission, and ideal are worthy of deep contemplation in order to understand his comprehensive vision of Advaita as a living and vibrant force in life:

The dry, abstract Advaita must become living—poetic—in everyday life; out of hopelessly intricate mythology must come concrete moral forms; and out of bewildering Yogi-ism must come the most scientific and practical psychology, and all this must be put in a form so that a child may grasp it. That is my life’s work.<sup>1</sup>

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I want to give them dry, hard reason, softened in the sweetest syrup of love and made spicy with intense work, and cooked in the kitchen of Yoga, so that even a baby can easily digest it (5,104).

My ideal indeed can be put into a few words and that is: to preach unto mankind their divinity, and how to make it manifest in every movement of life (7,501).

From these statements, we may derive the *foundational principles* of his message of Vedanta and discuss their ramifications, practical applications, relevance to the modern age, and above all the secret of its timeless appeal.

The present paper is a rather sketchy attempt in this direction.





### **The Foundational Principles of Swamiji's Message**

Swamiji's teachings are based upon the following foundational principles:

Principle 1: Divinity of all beings.<sup>2</sup>

Principle 2: Unity of all Existence or solidarity of the universe.

As a corollary to these may be added the following:

Principle 3: The essential spirituality of all life.

Principle 1 is related to the 'microcosm' or the individual aspect of Existence, *sat*, and is based on the Vedantic equation *sat* identically = *chit*, Consciousness. Principle 2 states that the microcosm and the macrocosm are two aspects of one and the same Existence. In fact, it is a statement about the 'dynamic equilibrium' of the microcosm and the macrocosm. The corollary, Principle 3, is a natural consequence of the Principles 1 and 2 as could be seen by the following argument: Principle 1 states, that each soul, jivatma in Vedantic parlance, is divine. Since jivatma is the

microcosm, it means that microcosmic existence is divine. Principle 2 states that microcosm  $\Rightarrow$  macrocosm. The symbol  $\Rightarrow$  denotes a 'dynamic equilibrium'. This will be explained in the next section. Hence, it follows that all life, both in its microcosmic and macrocosmic aspects, is divine.

These principles form the core of Swamiji's Advaita Vedanta that would make Advaita 'living, poetic, in everyday life'. Sri Ramakrishna was the pioneer in the modern age as a master-teacher of harmony and synthesis. And Swamiji inherited that genius from his master. This makes Advaita Vedanta as interpreted and preached by Ramakrishna-Vivekananda a master symphony synthesising and harmonising infinite strains of music.

Swamiji's genius of synthesis has been portrayed in the following memorable words by his French biographer Romain Rolland:

In the two words equilibrium and synthesis, Vivekananda's constructive genius may be summed up. He embraced all the paths of the spirit: the four Yogas in their entirety, renunciation and service, art and science, religion and action from the most spiritual to the most practical. Each of the ways that he taught had its own limits, but he himself had been through them all, and embraced them all. As in a quadriga, he held the reins of all four ways of truth, and he travelled towards Unity along them all simultaneously. He was the personification of the harmony of all human energy.<sup>3</sup>

And the magic watchword was Unity. Unity of every Indian man and woman (and world-unity as well); of all the powers of the spirit—dream and action; reason, love and work. Unity of the hundred races of India with their hundred different tongues and hundred thousand gods springing from the same religious centre, the core of present and future reconstruction. Unity of the thousand sects of Hinduism. Unity within the vast Ocean of religious thought and all rivers past and present, Western and Eastern (238–9).

### **The Microcosm $\Rightarrow$ Macrocosm Equation: The Concept of Dynamic Equilibrium**

The discovery of the oneness of the microcosm and the macrocosm, oneness in the sense of a 'dynamic equilibrium', was made by Swamiji in a flash of illumination. It is this experience that authenticated all his statements on such unity. Thus are infused into them the power of his own direct realisation, *anubhuti*. It is this realisation rather than mere rational power that charges Swamiji's message with the authority and the power to transform the hearts and elevate the minds of people everywhere. And Swamiji, following the ancient techniques of the Vedantic masters, acharyas, combined reason and logic, *yukti*, scriptural authority, *shruti*, and personal realisation *svanubhuti*—a three-pronged attack on the citadel of Truth, leaving nothing unsure. As Romain Rolland puts it beautifully: 'His claim to greatness lies in the fact that he not only *proved* its unity by reason, but *stamped* it upon the heart of India in flashes of illumination' (237).

The experience of the oneness of the microcosm and the macrocosm came to him in a flash of illumination while meditating under an old peepul tree near Almora. After this experience, Swamiji narrated his experience to his dear brother disciple, Swami Akhandananda, whom Swamiji used to address as Gangadhar, in the following words:

Oh, Gangadhar! I have just passed through one of the greatest moments of my life. Here under this peepul tree one of the greatest problems of my life has been solved. I have found the oneness of the macrocosm with the microcosm. In this microcosm of the body everything that is there [in the macrocosm], exists. I have seen the whole universe within an atom.<sup>4</sup>

This realisation of his seems to be reflected in the lectures he later gave in the West under the

titles, 'Cosmos: the Macrocosm' and 'Cosmos: the Microcosm'.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of 'dynamic equilibrium' is a well-known concept in physics and chemistry. In such a reaction, the contradiction between dynamism as opposed to being static is obliterated. Or, rather, such a contradiction can be said to have never existed in the first place, and it is the recognition, *pratyabhijna*, of this fact that removes the apparent contradiction.

The relation between the Atman and Brahman, embodied in the equation 'Atman = that is, identically equal to, Brahman', called *mahavakya*, great dictum, is an identity statement that forms the core of Advaita Vedanta. That same Reality, which is called in its individual, microcosmic, aspect as Atman, is called Brahman in its collective, macrocosmic, aspect. Even etymologically, Brahman means big, vast, immense. This being so, the same equation should hold for the various dimensions of the Atman-Brahman too: at the physical, gross or *sthula* level, the 'Atman = Brahman' equation translates to *vishva*, individual consciousness associated with matter = *Virat*, cosmic consciousness associated with matter; at the mental, subtle or *sukshma* level, it translates as *taijasa*, individual consciousness associated with the mind and higher intelligence called *vijnanamaya* or *dhi* = *Hiranyagarbha*, cosmic consciousness associated with collective *vijnanamaya*; *prajna*, individual consciousness associated with the causal or unmanifest = *Ishvara*, cosmic consciousness associated with the causal or Unmanifest.

Vedantic texts, of which *Mandukya Upanishad* stands supreme, discuss these three states of the mind, namely *vishva*, *taijasa*, and *prajna*, as associated with the states of waking, dream, and deep sleep called *jaग्रata*, *svapna*, and *सुशुप्ति*, and correspond these again with the three syllables of Om: *a*, *u*, *m*. Although these

Vedanta						Vedas	Tantra
Letters of Om	The Three States <i>Avasthatraya</i>	The Quarters of the Self		The Three Bodies <i>Shariratraya</i>	The Five Sheaths <i>Panchakosha</i>	The Seven Spheres <i>Saptaloka</i>	The Six Chakras
		Microcosm <i>Vyashti</i>	Macrocosm <i>Samashti</i>				
A	Waking	<i>Vaishvanara</i>	<i>Virat</i>	Gross	<i>Annamaya</i>	<i>Bhuh</i>	<i>Muladhara</i>
U	Dreaming	<i>Tajasa</i>	<i>Hiranyagarbha</i>	Subtle	<i>Pranamaya</i>	<i>Bhuvah</i>	<i>Svadhishthana</i>
					<i>Manomaya</i>	<i>Svah</i>	<i>Manipura</i>
					<i>Vijnanamaya</i>	<i>Mahah Janah Tapah</i>	<i>Anahata Vishuddha</i>
M	Deep Sleep	<i>Prajna</i>	<i>Ishvara</i>	Causal	<i>Anandamaya</i>	<i>Satyam</i>	<i>Ajna</i>
<div><div></div><div><i>Bhavamukha</i> (Avatara)</div><div></div></div>							
<i>Amatra</i>	<i>Turiya</i> = Atman = Brahman			Beyond the Three Bodies	Distinct from the Five Sheaths	Beyond All Spheres	<i>Sahasrara</i>

ideas appear complicated and technical, it was Swamiji's genius to have brought them to the level of application to make Advaita 'living' 'in everyday' life through his interpretation of the 'Atman = Brahman' *mahavakya* as 'each soul is potential divine'.

The chart given here gives a comprehensive pictorial presentation of these concepts giving correspondences between the above Vedantic ideas, the Vedic concept of seven worlds, *sapta loka*, and the tantric concept of six 'chakras', *shat-chakra*. In fact, avatars or incarnations of God, like Sri Ramakrishna, lived constantly in a state called *bhavamukha*, which is the threshold of the finite and the Infinite, relative and the Absolute, changing phenomenon and the unchanging Noumenon. The state of *bhavamukha* is said to be identical with the integral knowledge, *sampurna jnana*, that Sri Ramakrishna calls *vijnana*.

It is interesting to note how Swamiji discovered the application of the above Vedantic concept of Atman identically = Brahman, the *mahavakya* of Vedanta at its core and forming its bedrock to everyday life and activity by looking upon this core concept as the truth of interaction between the individual, a human being, and the collective, the society. Social sciences, applied psychology including mass psychology, group dynamics, and so on are all attempts to study the interaction between the individual and the collective. The modern theories of management science, systems analysis, systems thinking, and systems approach, holistic approach, the science of ecology, the science of cybernetics, which is the basis of computer science, network and interaction study—all these are some of the fields of application of the microcosm  $\rightleftharpoons$  macrocosm equation.

A detailed study of the wide-ranging applications of this equation needs to be undertaken so that the Vedantic magic watchword of 'unity' percolates into *all* of life and existence—unity that is mystically experienced by avatars like Sri Ramakrishna in the state of *bhavamukha* and explained by him as the complete or integral knowledge of *vijnana*, stated as 'the Many and the One are the same Reality' by Swamiji (8.261).

### **'The One and the Many are the Same Reality'**

This message of oneness preached by Swamiji is but an elaboration of the aphoristic statement he made once: 'What Ramakrishna Paramahansa and I have added to this is that the Many and the One are the same Reality, perceived by the same mind at different times and in different attitudes' (ibid.). It is this message of Swamiji that forms the basis of his philosophy of work, karma-yoga—karma not opposed to jnana, knowledge, but as expressing jnana and bhakti, devotion. This has been pointed out in the following memorable words by Sister Nivedita in her Introduction to *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*:

It must never be forgotten that it was the Swami Vivekananda who, while proclaiming the sovereignty of the Advaita Philosophy, as including that experience in which all is one, without a second, also added to Hinduism the doctrine that Dvaita, Vishishtadvaita, and Advaita are but three phases or stages in a single development, of which the last-named constitutes the goal. This is part and parcel of the still greater and more simple doctrine that the many and the One are the same Reality, perceived by the mind at different times and in different attitudes; or as Sri Ramakrishna expressed the same thing, 'God is both with form and without form. And He is that which includes both form and formlessness.'



Sister Nivedita

It is this which adds its crowning significance to our Master's life, for here he becomes the meeting-point, not only of East and West, but also of past and future. If the many and the One be indeed the same Reality, then it is not all modes of worship alone, but equally all modes of work, all modes of struggle, all modes of creation, which are paths of realisation. No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labour is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life is itself religion. To have and to hold is as stern a trust as to quit and to avoid.

This is the realisation which makes Vivekananda the great preacher of Karma, not as divorced from, but as expressing Jnana and Bhakti. To him, the workshop, the study, the farmyard, and the field are as true and fit scenes for the meeting of God with man as the cell of the monk or the door of the temple. To him, there is no difference between service of man and worship of God, between manliness and faith, between true righteousness and spirituality. All his words, from one point of view, read as a commentary upon this central conviction. 'Art, science, and religion', he said once, 'are but three different ways of expressing a single truth.'

But in order to understand this we must have the theory of Advaita' (1.xv–xvi).

### **Advaita or Monism at Three Levels: Gross, Subtle, and Causal**

Swamiji spoke about three kinds of monism, Advaita, in his famous 'Paper on Hinduism': materialistic monism, philosophical monism, and spiritual monism, at the three levels of gross, subtle, and causal respectively. In other words, the highest Advaita that Acharya Shankara and other Advaita acharyas before and after him applied only at the spiritual level to realise the oneness or identity of Atman and Brahman, *atma-brahma-aikya*, which was held as the summum bonum of life and existence, while Swamiji discovered that the same Advaita could be applied at the levels of matter and mind-life, gross and subtle, too so that Advaita percolates, interpenetrates, informs, and transforms everyday life into one indivisible wholeness. This is perhaps what Swamiji meant by saying that 'Advaita must become living—poetic—in everyday life'.

### **The Harmony and Synthesis of Yogas: Swamiji's Contribution**

What is the method that Swamiji desired should be adopted to achieve this integral, all-round development: material, intellectual, mental, and spiritual? In a dialogue with Sister Nivedita, Swamiji points out his method: 'You may ask, "What is the place of Ramakrishna in this scheme?" He is the method, that wonderful unconscious method! He did not understand himself. ... But he lived that great life: and I read the meaning' (8.267).

Elsewhere, Swamiji says that such a unique personality as Sri Ramakrishna, who was a remarkable combination of jnana, bhakti, karma, and yoga, has scarcely appeared on the earth before (7.412). He combined in one single personality both intensity and extensity: deep as the ocean and broad as

the skies. And Swamiji believed that it should be possible to create a society in which such a combination of intensity and extensity is achieved, for if one individual could achieve it, why not a society, a society being, after all, 'an aggregate of individuals' (ibid.). Of course, Swamiji knew that such individuals are few and far between, and cannot be created in large numbers. So he suggested a new type of harmony, a 'collective harmony' by a group of individuals. In a letter to Kidi, Swamiji writes:

I agree with you so far that faith is a wonderful insight and that it alone can save; but there is the danger in it of breeding fanaticism and barring further progress. Jnana is all right; but then there is the danger of its becoming dry intellectualism. Love is great and noble; but it may die away *in meaningless sentimentalism*. A harmony of all these is the thing required. Ramakrishna was such a harmony. Such beings are few and far between; but keeping him and his teachings as the ideal, we can move on. And if amongst us, each one may not individually attain to that perfection, still we may get it collectively by counteracting, equiposing, adjusting, and fulfilling one another. This would be *harmony* by a number of persons, and a decided advance on all other forms and creeds (4.356).

Thus, the method, according to Swamiji, of realising the innate Divinity of every being, and the microcosm  $\rightleftharpoons$  macrocosm equation, is through a combination of the four yogas, and through them to achieve, at each level or dimension of the Self, the cosmic identity or oneness with a larger life. Recall in this connection Swamiji's famous statement: 'Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within, by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy—by one or more, or all of these—and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details (1.257).'

The emblem of the Ramakrishna Mission is Swamiji's eloquent message to humankind, of harmony and synthesis of yogas. This is the best expression of what he preached, what he wanted every person to be, to realise, either in the East or in the West. The goal is to realise one's real Self, the Atman, the swan in the symbol. 'This is the whole of religion,' according to Swamiji.

### **Swamiji's Interpretation of Advaita Vedanta vis-à-vis Developments in Modern Physics**

Certain sweeping changes took place in the world of science, particularly, modern physics, contemporaneously with Swamiji's teaching of Advaita Vedanta beginning to take root. Within a few years of the passing away of Swamiji in 1902, Max Plank's quantum theory, that was born in 1900, began to grow like a gigantic tree shattering our conception of matter and throwing up fantastic insights into the microcosmic world of particles and fields. Close on heels came in 1905 the special theory of relativity due to Albert Einstein and the general theory of relativity a decade later, all of which thoroughly revolutionised our conception of space, time, and matter.

That space-time-matter form a continuum was scientifically established and paved the way for Swamiji's Advaita Vedanta as space-time-matter-consciousness continuum getting accepted and established on firm foundations. Swamiji anticipated this when he spoke about Advaita at three levels, physical, mental-intellectual, and spiritual—Oneness at all these three levels. During the one hundred years and more that have elapsed since then, modern science has thrown up, particularly through quantum theory and relativity theory, and later through biological sciences—DNA and the gigantic genome project at the turn of the twenty-first century—strikingly new Weltanschauung, world view, that has

transformed our conception of space, time, matter, and consciousness.

The unification of the three forces of Nature, weak, strong, and electromagnetic, by Abdus Salam and Steven Weinberg, although a remarkable breakthrough, has been unable to integrate the gravitational force in the unification scheme. Einstein himself devoted the evening of his life, for nearly three decades in the quest of the so-called 'unified field theory' vainly attempting to unify the strong and weak forces of Nature on the one hand, and the gravitational and electromagnetic forces on the other on the basis of one grand underlying principle.

However, towards the end of the twentieth century and the dawn of the new millennium, 'superstring theory', called for short the 'string theory', has emerged as the grand unifier of the two rival theories—of relativity theory which gives us insight into the macrocosm, the world of stars and galaxies, the universe on the largest of scales, on the one hand, and of quantum mechanics that explains with stunning precision the microcosm, the world of atoms and molecules down to the subatomic elementary particles, the universe on the smallest of scales.

It is in this context that Swamiji's exposition and interpretation of Advaita Vedanta as a grand unification theory, *ekatva vijñana*, the wisdom of oneness or unity in the language of the Upanishads, gain tremendous significance.

### **Socio-Cultural Application of this Synthesis: Union of the East and the West**

At the collective level, the harmony and synthesis of yogas taught by Swamiji has a wide range of applications. One such application is the union of the East and the West. This was one of his very favourite dreams and he would return to it time and again. He wanted the synthesis of the materialistic monism achieved by the West with the

philosophical and spiritual monism achieved by the East, particularly India. By combining the materialistic advances of the West with the philosophical and spiritual progress of the East, Swamiji wanted to bring about a new world order, which is in the womb of futurity. The following conversations of Swamiji throw great light on the East-West synthesis that he wished to achieve:

I believe that the Hindu faith has developed the spiritual in its devotees at the expense of the material, and I think that in the Western world the contrary is true. By uniting the materialism of the West with the spiritualism of the East, I believe much can be accomplished (7.284).

India has suffered in its material aspect. Where brute strength and bloodshed has advanced other nations, India has deprecated such brutal manifestations; and by the law of survival of the fittest, which applies to nations as well as to individuals, it has fallen behind as a power on the earth in the material sense. But will it not be an impossibility to find in the great combative Western countries, where such tremendous energy is needed to develop the pressing practical necessities of the nineteenth century, this spirit which prevails in placid India? May not one combine the energy of the lion with the gentleness of the lamb? (7.289).

### **The New World Order: Satya Yuga—the Culmination of Advaita**

The three principles of Swamiji mentioned earlier and discussed briefly in their applications and implications, have a further revolutionary implication in the following:

The principle 1: Divinity of Man, would engender a 'New Social Philosophy', as hinted at by Swamiji when he said that the fact of Divinity of man is 'the explanation of the whole history of human progress in the material, intellectual, or spiritual plane ... it is the duty of every *soul* to treat, think of, and behave to other *souls* as such, i.e. as *Gods*' (4.357), when

applied to the collective, that is, society as a whole, either in the East or the West. This is the '*Navina-samaja-tantra*; new-social-philosophy' of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda.

Out of principle 2, namely, the unity of all Existence or the solidarity of the universe, would come a 'new social science', *Navina-samaja-vijnana* of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda, whose first offshoots have already been seen in physics, particularly after the unification of the fundamental forces of Nature by Salam, Weinberg, and the superstring and grand unification theory being attempted in elementary particle high energy physics and astro-particle theory in very recent times.<sup>6</sup>

Out of the corollary, principle 3, namely, the essential spirituality of life, would emerge a 'new social consciousness' or awareness, in which the distinctions between the sacred and the secular, between Vedanta and science, between poetry and philosophy, between karma and jnana, between a householder and a sannyasin, would have been erased: 'Science and religion will meet and shake hands. Poetry and philosophy will become friends. This will be the religion of the future, and if we can work it out, we may be sure that it will be for all times and peoples,' as Swamiji declared in his jnana yoga lectures (2.140). This is the *navina-samaja-chetana* of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda, in which the Vedic vision of one life, the divine life—not monastic life versus householder's life, spiritual life versus worldly life, Eastern life of renunciation versus Western life of enjoyment—but one undivided wholeness of life, *paripurna jivan*, will have re-emerged in full bloom.

This was the Vedic ideal of a rishi—a person of God, a person of divine wisdom, a full person, a world citizen: not merely a householder or a sannyasin or a scientist or a poet or an artist or a psychologist or a yogi or a social worker or a thinker or whatever *separately*—but yet all



these and much more. Such a person represents humanity in its fullness. And this humanity is one and the same as divinity. It is to revive this rishi-ideal that Sri Ramakrishna was born. And the 'new world order' that would emerge out of these three: the new social philosophy, the new social science, and the new social consciousness would uphold the rishi-ideal before all people in all countries. It is then that the dream of 'one world' would come true. It is this 'new world order' that Swamiji called the Satya Yuga. And in a prophetic utterance he said that Sri Ramakrishna's advent marks the beginning of this Satya Yuga: 'From the date that the Ramakrishna Incarnation was born, has sprung the Satya Yuga (Golden Age). In this Incarnation ... the whole world will be unified by means of Bhakti (Devotion) and Prema (Divine Love)' (6.327-8).

And in this Golden Age, Truth will be for *all* to see and experience and realise—no special privileges, no esotericism, no exclusivism, no fanatic personality-fixation. Impersonality and impartiality will be the beacon-lights to guide the seeker on. In a conversation, Swamiji points this out:

Yes, my own life is guided by the enthusiasm of a certain great personality, but what of that? Inspiration was never filtered out to the world through one man! ... It is true that I believe Ramakrishna Paramahansa to have been inspired. But then I am myself inspired also. And you [Nivedita] are inspired. And your disciples will be; and theirs after them; and so on, to the end of time! ... Don't you see that the age of esoteric interpretation is over? For good or for ill, that day is vanished, never to return. Truth, in the future, is to be open to the world!<sup>7</sup>

And the same thing he declared more forcefully in a letter to his Madras disciples: 'No shilly-shally, no esoteric blackguardism, no secret humbug, nothing should be done in a corner. No special favouritism of the Master, no Master at that, even.'<sup>8</sup> Truth will be a pathless

land, an open domain of Freedom, 'broad as the skies, deep as the ocean' (6.137). 'Ye shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make you free,' as Christ said.<sup>9</sup>

The following eloquent exhortation of Swamiji at the end of his famous lecture 'The Way to the Realisation of Universal Religion' is the fitting finale to this paper, vast as it is as the skies and deep as the ocean:

Is God's book finished? Or is it still a continuous revelation going on? It is a marvellous book—these spiritual revelations of the world. The Bible, the Vedas, the Koran, and all other sacred books are but so many pages, and an infinite number of pages remain yet to be unfolded. I would leave it open for all of them. We stand in the present, but open ourselves to the infinite future. We take in all that has been in the past, enjoy the light of the present, and open every window of the heart for all that will come in the future. Salutation to all the prophets of the past, to all the great ones of the present, and to all that are to come in the future! (2.374). ❧

## Notes and References

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5. *Complete Works*, 2.203, 212.
6. For these latest developments, the reader may refer to the excellent exposition in Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (New York: Vintage, 2000).
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# The Indeterminate Technology

Swami Sunirmalananda

**Y**OUR EYES DECEIVE YOU! You see what does not exist! Yes, this happens. And this article is not about maya.

However strong, educated, wealthy, healthy or powerful you may be, your eyes and other senses deceive you. Do you think this hasn't happened in your life? Of course it has! No philosophy is necessary to explain the simple fact to you that, at least sometimes, what you see may not be true at all. When you saw something in the supermarket, it instantly appeared beautiful to you and you went for it. Subsequently, you weren't so happy with that thing. This is just an example.

Experiencing or seeing things which don't exist is a plain fact of life. And it is a serious matter also. So all schools of thought born in undivided India, called Aryavarta, have taken up this matter seriously and have called the phenomenon *khyati*.

*Khyati* technically means 'error'. It is an error of experience. Your eyes may be powerful, your brain may be functioning perfectly, and you might be a very intelligent person, with no defects at all. Yet, sometimes you commit errors in judging things. What you saw might not be there at all.

Why does such a thing happen? Using the most famous example of silver and nacre, all schools of Indian philosophy give their opinions about why such a thing happens. This silver-nacre example is like a trademark for explaining philosophical concepts. The idea is like

this: There is something on the ground. You see that, and it appears to be a piece of shining silver. You are about to go for it, but it is actually a little shell or nacre. Nacre is a molluscan shell, secreted by molluscs, which becomes a pearl layer. Nacre is formed due, principally, to Araconite and other organic material. Nacre confuses because it shines like silver. And people confuse it for silver. Philosophers of ancient India have used this nacre extensively in their discussions.

## Why Do Our Eyes Deceive Us?

There are several explanations as to why we have this confusion called *khyati*. Bad light, problem with vision, wrong judgement, clouded mind—these are some ordinary reasons. However, philosophers don't consider them seriously. They are rather concerned about an altogether normal person and an altogether normal situation where we have such a wrong experience. So, each school has a special interpretation of the error, *khyati*, of our senses, and that itself has become a huge science. Of all the schools of philosophy, however, perhaps the Advaita explanation is the best, as it is sympathetic to us, straightforward, and exemplary.

Advaita has a matter-of-fact explanation for the question as to why X saw a piece of silver and then saw nacre. First of all, Advaitins don't agree with other schools, which say such things: 'Oh, come on! The silver was in your mind, and you superimposed it on something that was shining.' Or, 'You saw the existence, the basic is-ness, of silver in the universe, and also the is-ness of nacre', and so on.

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Advaita Vedanta simply says, 'It is possible'. It says, 'Don't worry. Your eyes saw what it saw at that instant. And the next instant, it saw what it saw.' That is, seeing silver was correct and seeing nacre also was correct. This simply means that your eyes were calling a spade a spade all the time. It saw silver and then it saw nacre. At different points of time.

We therefore said that Advaita Vedanta is sympathetic to us. People unnecessarily blame Advaita as *mayavada*, magic, and so on. In fact, some people think that Advaitic maya is like a blanket. It is covering Brahman. Evidently, Advaita is compassionate to us and gives us strength when we are confused with the issue of silver or nacre.

Both silver and nacre are correct. What is the meaning of this strange statement? How can the eye see both things in the same locus and how can both be true? It is possible, say the Advaitin, and calls it *anirvachaniya*, indeterminable or inexplicable. This is the truest way of explaining why and how your eyes deceive you. You saw something shining. You thought it was silver. And then it turned out to be a piece of dead shell. Advaita declares that both were true! Thus according to Advaita, you were not foolish, after all, when you initially saw silver in a piece of nacre.

### **How Can Both Be True?**

How can seeing both things, nacre and silver, be correct?

*Anirvachaniya khyati* is that state when you see something for a second and that is real for that particular moment. Soon things change. You next see something quite different. If what you saw in the first moment was not real, you couldn't have seen it at all. If what you saw later was not real, you couldn't have seen that either. What you saw the first moment was not real, because you did not see it continuously later. If

what you saw in the first moment was real, you should have seen it again, all the time. So, the silver you saw in nacre is neither real nor unreal. It is inexplicable or indeterminate.

Real, not real, and inexplicable. These are the three states of name and form. The silver is not fake, because you saw it. Maybe another person also saw it and was equally confused, and maybe yet another. How can we say the silver you saw was not there at that instant, when you actually saw it? However, it was not real. Otherwise, even after an hour, you would have seen the same silver.

So, Advaita solves this strange problem of your eyes deceiving you in a peculiar way: What you saw is both real and unreal, which is absurd, and so it is beyond real and unreal. That is, it is indeterminable. Advaita, through the theory of *anirvachaniya khyati*, proposes a new concept of the third state of things. That is, Advaita Vedanta proposes the theory of relativity in time-space.

Before going to that aspect, let's remind you that another best example of your experiencing *khyati* or the error of indeterminate experience is dream. Everyday everyone goes to sleep. Every day everyone sees dreams. When a person is seeing a dream, she or he is totally involved in it, and it is real. When the person wakes up, the dream is gone. The world of waking experience becomes real then. If we compare silver to dream state, nacre is the waking state.

Advaita respects all our experiences and states of consciousness. It says: 'Your dream state also is real for that duration. And so we call it *prati-bhasika satta*, the plane of mirror-image like existence. It is neither real or unreal but indeterminate. We don't say it is absolutely real, but it is a *satta* or state of awareness which is real in that situation of your being. Your waking state is also real. Again for that duration. We shall call this state *vyavaharika satta*, the plane of waking existence. Know that everything is relative, in

time-space. Acharya Shankara was the first ever propounder of this concept of relativity. Nothing is absolute.

*Anirvachaniya khyati* is a great contribution of Advaita Vedanta. Especially for this Internet age, this concept is extremely important and vital. Engineers are now busy constructing newer planes of existence in space-time. Though they have no idea about Acharya Shankara's concept of indeterminateness, they are working on the same principle. What does that mean?

### **Indeterminate Reality in Technology**

This is happening now in the new world we are in—the technological world or the Internet universe. The acronym **www** has indeed become a worldwide web in a different sense. Till now, we had the waking state, *vyavaharika satta*, and the dream state, *pratibhasika satta*, in space-time or *nama-rupa*. Now, there are more. Thanks to technology, you wear a special pair of glasses and gloves and are transported to Mars or Jupiter.

Virtual reality takes you to Mars and gives you an experience of that planet, if you so wish, while you are sitting in your room. This is not a three-dimensional movie. In virtual reality, you altogether forget your mundane existence and are participating in a different universe. It is an interactive universe. As long as you are there, that universe is real for you. It is another form of *pratibhasika satta*. It is indeterminate cognition. This is one web the Internet has created around you.

Then there is another, higher net. That is augmented reality. For this, you need not sit before your computer or mobile phone. You need not wear any headgear also. This is still more amazing. You are sitting in a hall. You suddenly see a huge whale jump from the floor into the air and water spilling all over you. The floor has become a little pool of blue water. Next, you suddenly see

a lion around you. You suddenly see an elephant walking towards you. You shout and scream! And it's all gone. A virtual zoo in your hall. This is augmented reality. Did you see the elephant or tiger? Did you see the whale? Had someone hypnotised you? Were you dreaming? None of these. You were wide awake, and you saw an elephant or whale. So, this is another cosmic web you have been pushed into now. And in space-time, this relative world is yet another *anirvachaniya khyati*.

The time has come for yet another, still more glittering and marvellous web. This is the Internet of things. Rather, let's call it the Internet of everything. No gadgets, no wires, no headset, no goggles. You just go in the street and everything is 'digitised'. All devices are interconnected or connected to the Internet. They are storing data and sharing information. Everything has become alive, so to say. Everything is connected to one another. Buses and trams on the street talk to each other. Cars converse with one another. You enter the room and your refrigerator knows you need a cool drink. It tells the supermarket that you are out of vegetables. Life becomes easier, faster, more and more accurate, and interesting. So this is still another *pratibhasika satta* or dream reality in space-time. Again indeterminate, *anirvachaniya*.

### **What about you?**

You are inside a web or net, which is inside a net, and which is inside a net. In the name of becoming free, you are throwing more and more nets around you. In the end, you are bound to be a machine. While Vedanta tries to see inanimate matter as an expression of Consciousness, technology turns Consciousness also into a mechanical device.

Now you see that there are several *sattas* or indeterminate realities. You are moving from one indeterminate reality to another. That is, for sometime you live in the dream world, then the

Internet of things world, then the augmented reality world. So you are being pushed from one *anirvachaniya* world to another.

Now you should ask. What is the Real universe, if any? Or, amidst all these relative realities, which one is the absolute Reality? Is there one such?

### What is the Absolute?

The Buddhists don't have the answer. But Advaita Vedanta has. When you are tired with *pratibhasika* or dream reality, virtual reality or *vyavaharika* or mundane reality, augmented reality, and the Internet of things, you seek the Determinate, the absolute Reality. It is called *paramarthika satta*. This is the eternal ground, the Consciousness, the base, the foundation upon which all relative realities are built in space-time.

*Anirvachaniya khyati* or indeterminate experience of silver in nacre is only to remind us that the nacre which we see is also not permanently real. And the idea of the nacre-ness too is not permanently real. Behind everything, there is that one Consciousness.

### Sri Ramakrishna's Advice

'Tie the knowledge of Advaita at the hem of your cloth and go where you please', is the simplest advice of Sri Ramakrishna.<sup>1</sup> This is a timely advice for the present and future age. All of us, who are conscious beings and who do not want to be robots, should remember this advice constantly.

What is this Advaita knowledge? The Advaita knowledge is that all the universes we experience are in space-time, are neither real or unreal, but relatively real called indeterminate states of existence. The solid ground is Consciousness, called the Expansive, Brahman in Sanskrit. Expansive because it is limitless. We stand firm on that Consciousness and interact with the maze. Then we shall never be bound in the labyrinth.



We always have the code to the exit door ready.

This is the importance of Advaita Vedanta for this and the future ages. Advaita Vedanta of Acharya Shankara and the Upanishads did not say everything is magic or maya. It said, everything you experience through the senses is relative in space-time. The centre of everything is the real you. And that real you are Consciousness. Hold on to that and all will be well. Swami Vivekananda declared: 'O ye modern Hindus, de-hypnotise yourselves. The way to do that is found in your own sacred books. Teach yourselves, teach every one his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.'<sup>2</sup>



### References

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# The Significance of the Mahavakyas

Swami Atmajnanananda

## Introduction

**B**EFORE SPEAKING ABOUT the deep meaning of the *mahavakyas*, the ‘great sayings’ of the Upanishads, I thought it would be helpful to remind ourselves that there is nothing absolute about the designation of the four standard Upanishadic verses as ‘great sayings’ or *mahavakyas*. That is to say, we should not expect to find an original red-lined version of the Upanishads with these four verses highlighted and raised to a special philosophical status. For one thing, we know that the early tradition was an oral tradition, handed down from teacher to student. Furthermore, it is not known with much certainty why or when these four verses, out of the many thousands of verses of the Upanishads, were designated *mahavakyas*.

The verses in question, at least according to the Advaitic tradition, are: *aham brahmasmi*, *tat tvam asi*, *ayam atma brahma*, and *prajnanam brahma*. What we do know is that they were chosen by Acharya Shankara to represent mantras attached to the four *mathas*, spiritual centres, in the four corners of India, each of the four taken from one of the four Vedas. Thus, we find that: ‘*Aham brahmasmi*; I am Brahman’<sup>1</sup> of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, Yajur Veda, is connected with the Shringeri Pitha; ‘*Tat tvam asi*; Thou art That’<sup>2</sup> of the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, Sama Veda, with the Dvaraka Pitha; ‘*Ayam atma brahma*; This Self is Brahman’<sup>3</sup> of *Mandukya*

*Upanishad*, Atharva Veda, with the Jyotirmatha Pitha; and ‘*Prajnanam brahma*; Brahman is pure consciousness’<sup>4</sup> of *Aitareya Upanishad*, Rig Veda, with the Govardhana Pitha.

It is probably due to the tremendous influence of Acharya Shankara that these four mantras are now considered by many to be the authentic *mahavakyas*, but when did the designation become more or less ‘official’ does not seem to be known. What we do know is that these four mantras not only represent some of the most important teachings of the Upanishads, but also are guidelines for the sannyasis who belong to the various *sampradayas* of the *Dashanami* Orders founded by Acharya Shankara.

Despite the historical uncertainty regarding the origin of the *mahavakyas*, we cannot deny the wonderful philosophical and spiritual significance of these four statements—the first three dealing with the ultimate oneness of the individual Self, or jivatman, and the supreme Reality or Brahman, while the fourth one dealing with the nature of Brahman as pure consciousness. Each of the four speaks to the essential teaching of Advaita Vedanta: the apparent individual self is none other than the supreme Reality, covered with a veil of ignorance or *maya*.

## Philosophical Significance of the Mahavakyas

One of the reasons we have spent so much time on the connection between the *mahavakyas* and Acharya Shankara is that it has become almost impossible at present for Advaitins to analyse

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the meaning of these sayings without referring to some of the main tenets of Advaita Vedanta as laid down by Acharya Shankara. The final and absolute identity between the jivatman and Brahman, based on the concepts of *upadhi*, limiting adjunct, and *adhyasa*, false superimposition, has become almost sacrosanct in Advaitic circles. The *mahavakya*, 'tat tvam asi' has reached the level of a perfectly formulated mathematical equation.

In fact, there is such a pristine purity to the *mahavakyas* as understood today that either we forget to look at the actual context in which they are uttered in the Upanishads, or simply find it unnecessary. Nevertheless, it is instructive to view the *mahavakyas* in both ways, namely as statements of universal truth, eternal, unchanging, pristine in their philosophical purity, and also as belonging to the highly allegorical, poetic, symbolic world of the Upanishads, where Brahman itself can be found lonely and wishing for companionship in one of the most beautiful sections of the *Taittiriya Upanishad*. The former analysis gives us a feeling of absoluteness and finality, while the Upanishads present us with a highly nuanced and complex interpretation of the *mahavakyas* and reveal to us the importance of the mysterious and unknowable in our understanding of the cosmos. And both interpretations have much to teach us.

### The Basics of Advaita Vedanta

The position of the traditional Advaitic school of Acharya Shankara is well known and often summarised in the famous 'half verse': 'Brahman alone is real, the one absolute reality, *brahma satyam*; the world is unreal, false, or insubstantial, *jagat mithya*; and the individual soul is none other than Brahman, *jivah brahma eva na aparah*.'<sup>5</sup> The *mahavakyas*, at least the first three mentioned above, speak directly to the oneness of the individual soul and the supreme Soul,



Shringeri Pitha, Karnataka

while the fourth, *prajnanam brahma*, explains the nature of Brahman. It is interesting to note that none of the four *mahavakyas* touches on the unreal nature of the world.

The one verse that we might have expected to make the list of the four *mahavakyas*, especially since the first three have virtually identical meanings, is 'sarvam khalu idam brahma; all this is verily Brahman'.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps it is too realistic in its meaning and not in keeping with the 'falseness' of the universe. Or possibly, Acharya Shankara simply wanted to stress the reality of Brahman and its oneness with the jiva for the new monastic orders he had established. And, in fact, a case may be made that the first and third of these three Advaitic principles, namely the reality of Brahman and its oneness with the individual soul, are more defining features of Vedanta than the metaphysical status of the universe. Furthermore, the so-called 'falseness' of the world is clearly not as easily substantiated by the teachings of the Upanishads as the other two.

As mentioned earlier, there is a kind of mathematical purity to the explanation of the oneness of the individual soul and the supreme Soul. The interpretation turns on the relationship between the substantial or primary aspects of Brahman and jiva and the superficial or secondary attributes. Put quite simply, if we remove the



non-essential aspects of each, we find that there is nothing left that can be used to distinguish one from the other. And we are free to eliminate these secondary attributes, *upadhis*, not simply because they are non-essential, but more importantly because they do not belong to them.

The Advaitins utilise numerous examples to drive this point home. The redness we see in the crystal when a red rose is placed behind it really belongs to the rose, not the crystal. If some sort of transference of attributes had actually taken place, the redness would remain as the attribute of the crystal even after the rose is removed. But of course, the crystal reassumes its pure, colourless state as soon as the rose is gone. In the same way, the coverings of the jiva, often explained with the help of the *pancha-kosha* doctrine, do not really belong to it. Their elimination is more a question of removing our false sense of identity with them. Still, their removal leaves us with the same pure consciousness that forms the reality of Brahman. And if we eliminate the cosmic or creative aspect of Brahman, we are left with perfect identity between the two, '*ayam atma brahma*'.

### **The Uncompromising Path of Jnana Yoga**

The main criticism of such a doctrine, aside from counterarguments by the dualists, is that there is something cold and 'bloodless' about the impersonal, absolute Brahman posited here. This is a feeling Swami Vivekananda had after reading the philosophy of Kant, Hegel, and other German philosophers. S Radhakrishnan extended that to Acharya Shankara's *nirguna* Brahman, referring to it as a 'bloodless Absolute, dark with the excess of light'.<sup>7</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna was somewhat kinder, calling the path of Advaitic knowledge a little 'dry'. Regardless of what we think about Acharya Shankara's interpretation, when we examine the *mahavakyas* as we find them expressed within

the Upanishads themselves, we find nothing dry about them at all, compared to which the Brahman of Advaita Vedanta may not be 'bloodless,' but is certainly a bit anaemic. Or we might say, in the words of Sri Ramakrishna, with the standard Advaitic interpretation, we are getting the flesh of the bel fruit but not necessarily the full weight.

On the other hand, the Upanishadic Brahman sometimes appears as pure Being and sometimes as a great Being, the infinite absolute as well as a more personal concept of God: brooding, meditating, creating and expanding, magical and mystical, and even thrilling, in its breadth and intensity. And here, the context in which we find the *mahavakyas* expressed is of special interest, as opposed to the formulaic and mathematical shape they take in the hands of the Advaitic philosophers.

So, we will examine the *mahavakyas*, not simply from the point of view of philosophy, but through the poetry of the Upanishads. Ultimately, we will find no real contradiction between these two views. But I want to show the 'full-blooded' version of Brahman and Atman, as well as the pristine version, so that we can get a glimpse into the vast vision and mystical insight of the Vedic seers who composed the Upanishads, so that we can, to borrow a favourite phrase of Sri Ramakrishna, get the 'total weight of the bel-fruit'.<sup>8</sup>

### **'Prajnanam Brahma; Brahman is Pure Consciousness'**

The first of the *mahavakyas* that we will look at is from the *Aitareya Upanishad*, Rig Veda. It is the only one of the four that does not speak directly of the oneness of Brahman and the Self, but rather explains the nature of Brahman as pure consciousness. The section that contains these words begins with the question: 'What is that Self, which we worship?'<sup>9</sup> And as part of the reply, we find that

this Self, or absolute Reality, is identified with all the gods, all the elements, all creatures. 'All this is guided by consciousness, *prajñanam*, is ordered by consciousness. The ground of the universe is consciousness. Consciousness is Brahman' (3.1.3).

This is our first hint that pure consciousness is something more than we may think it is, for it forms the source and ground of the entire universe. It is the guiding force behind the creation of all living beings and dwells within all sentient beings as the inner guide and controller. Thus, we can say that Brahman, in addition to being pure consciousness, is also, when conditioned by the attributes of intelligence and the power of projection, one and the same as *ishvara*, the creator.

### 'Aham Brahmasmi; I am Brahman'

The second *mahavakya* that we will examine is found in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* and is repeated twice. The context in which the statement is uttered is very interesting. The claim is made in the previous verse that through *brahma-vidya* we shall become 'all'. Ordinarily, we would assume the compound *brahma-vidya* means 'knowledge of Brahman'. But here it seems to mean 'the knowledge that Brahman itself possesses', for the question is asked: 'What exactly is that knowledge which Brahman possessed that allowed Brahman to become "all"?'<sup>10</sup> In reply we learn that it was the knowledge, 'I am Brahman' that allowed Brahman to become all. Then it is explained that the gods also became 'all' through that knowledge, as did the saints and sages. And whoever, in like manner, knows oneself as 'I am Brahman', becomes all this, that is, attains to some kind of state of oneness with all beings and the universe. Even the gods cannot prevent this realisation, for such a person has become their Self as well.

This verse is then followed by nearly twenty pages of commentary by Acharya Shankara,



Dwaraka Pitha, Gujarat

showing how significant he considers these verses to be. But aside from the importance of the identity of the individual Self and Brahman, we find two crucial, though perhaps secondary, ideas. The first is that Brahman somehow becomes Brahman by having this knowledge of oneness, that Brahman is thought of in both a *nirguna* and *saguna* sense, capable of 'thinking' in a way not substantially different from the way the devas and human beings think, who were also considered qualified to understand 'I am Brahman'.

The second interesting idea is one that seems to remain just slightly beneath the surface in most of these Upanishadic verses, and which we also saw in the previous *mahavakya*, namely the ultimate oneness between Brahman and the 'all', which presumably includes the entire universe and its living beings. So, the emphasis in these verses is not only on a knowledge that leads to liberation or enlightenment, but also on one that expands one's sense of Self to a feeling of oneness with the entire universe. This association between Brahman and expansiveness can be understood simply by analysing the term 'Brahman', which is derived from the root *brhm* meaning 'to expand'. For the early Vedic seers, the sense of vastness, expansiveness, all-inclusiveness must have formed an important element in their understanding of Brahman and the universe.

### **'Ayam Atma Brahma; This Self is Brahman'**

The third *mahavakya* we will look at is from the *Mandukya Upanishad*. This Upanishad is the most purely philosophical of all the major Upanishads, so we should not expect to see Brahman presented in any allegorical or symbolic way. The Upanishad deals mainly with the three states of consciousness, waking, dream, and dreamless sleep, as well as the 'fourth', which transcends all three. It explains the true nature of the Self as the witnessing consciousness present throughout all of the various states of consciousness. And yet, even here, we find the same underlying, sometimes overlooked, theme of the Upanishads, namely that Brahman manifests as the universe, for the Upanishad begins with the words, '*om iti etad aksharam idam sarvam*'; the syllable Om is the entire visible universe'.<sup>11</sup>

The *mahavakya* itself, found in the following verse, '*Ayam atma brahma; all this is Brahman*', is preceded by the phrase '*Sarvam hi etad brahma; all this is indeed Brahman*'. None of this, of course, takes away from the principal meaning of the *mahavakya* as indicating the ultimate oneness of Brahman and Atman, but it does hint at the idea of the universe as more of a manifestation of Brahman than an illusory misreading of Brahman.

### **'Tat Tvam Asi; Thou art That'**

We now come to the last of the *mahavakyas*, the famous '*tat tvam asi*' of the *Chhandogya Upanishad*. It is first found in seventh verse of the eighth section of the sixth chapter of the Upanishad and is repeated at the end of each short section for the following seven sections. But the high Vedantic truths that are taught to the young Shvetaketu begin quite a bit earlier and are some of the most beautiful and profound teachings found in the Upanishads.

When we read them, we are reminded that the Upanishads are as much poetry as philosophy, beautiful imagery and allegory, not always meant to be taken literally, for, as we saw earlier, the authors were *kavis*, poets, and mystics, divinely inspired and filled with God. They were not merely philosophers and intellectuals. We will devote the majority of our attention to this last *mahavakya*, since it is the final teaching in this rich, colourful, and insightful section of the Upanishad.

We begin with the story of Shvetaketu, the blessed soul who was given the great teaching 'You are That'. Shvetaketu was the young son of a brahmana named Uddalaka Aruni. When the boy reached the age of twelve, his father explained to him the tradition of *brahmacharya* and how all in his family line had followed that tradition. So, Shvetaketu left home and spent the next twelve years leading a life of *brahmacharya*, studying with a qualified teacher, serving him in his forest retreat, and learning the Vedic scriptures from him.

At the end of twelve years, Shvetaketu returned to his father, Uddalaka. His father at once noted his high opinion of himself, as if he knew everything. He saw his arrogance and conceit and wanted to cure him of it. So, the father asked his son, Shvetaketu: 'My son, since you now think you know all that is to be known, surely you must know that by which one hears what cannot be heard, by which one perceives what cannot be perceived, and by which one knows what cannot be known. Did not your guru teach you that?'<sup>12</sup>

At this, Shvetaketu became humble and admitted that he neither was instructed in such knowledge nor knew the answer to such a strange question. He asked his father to explain it to him, and the rest of the sixth chapter represents his answer to his son. These teachings of Uddalaka to Shvetaketu represent the mystical heights of Vedantic thought regarding the real nature of reality and the Self. They can be broken

down into two distinct sections: the teachings regarding the nature of reality, or Brahman, with some very early ideas about creation, and then the final truth, the identity of that Reality with the Self within all beings.

Shvetaketu begins the dialogue by half wondering aloud about his father's statement. How is it possible to know that which is unknown, hear that which is unheard, see that which is unseen? For everything he had been taught belonged to the realm of lower knowledge, that is, knowledge gained through the senses or through inference, including even the knowledge of the Vedas. So he asks his father to explain, and Uddalaka gives a very beautiful reply regarding the nature of ultimate reality or Brahman, which he calls *sat*, Being or absolute Existence.

From his words we often get the impression that this *sat* is not simply the pure consciousness of Vedanta, but a great and powerful being that is responsible for the creation of the universe. He explains:

Why, in this way, my boy: by knowing the nature of one lump of clay, we can know the nature of everything made of clay, can we not? The shapes of other things, such as a pot, a toy elephant, and so on, are just names, given to help us talk about them. The reality in them is just the clay, is it not? ... By knowing the nature of a nugget of gold, the nature of all gold things is known; likewise, by knowing the nature of a nail file, we understand everything made of iron. The shapes and names we use for convenience. The reality is just the gold or the iron (6.1.4–6).

Then Shvetaketu replies: 'This is something new. Surely, my teachers did not know this. Otherwise they would have taught it to me. Please explain further' (6.1.7). Then Uddalaka explains the nature of creation, which is in reality nothing but Brahman manifesting as the visible universe, through a process of evolution of the elements. 'In the beginning there was nothing



Jyotirmatha Pitha, Uttarakhand

but Being alone, one without a second, undifferentiated. Some claim that there was non-being, but how can something arise out of nothing? There had to be being' (6.2.1, 2).

Then we find the wonderful allegory, which we also find in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*: That great Being, *sat*, 'looked around'. Perhaps it saw that there was nothing other than itself. Perhaps it felt lonely and had a desire to become manifest, and so thought to itself '*bahu syam*; may I be many', '*prajayeya*; may I grow forth; may I propagate, generate, create offspring' (6.2.3). Thus began the process of evolution.

It was not that the universe came into being at that very thought of creation, though that is also one theory, just as the dream world manifests instantaneously and fully formed. But here, the manifestation begins with the elements, the first being fire. And 'fire' also looked around and thought, 'May I be many; may I propagate' (6.2.3). And it created water. And the water looked around and thought, 'May I be many; may I propagate' (6.2.4). And it created *anna*, food or earth. Then that being looked around and thought, 'Let me enter into these three deities, elements—fire, water, and earth—by means of this living self' (6.3.2). Then that great being entered into them and with the help of name and form manifested this visible universe.

The remaining portion of this first section explains how these three elements evolve and account for all of creation.

Now, we come to the more famous portion of this chapter, the '*tat tvam asi*' section. And we find that it is also far more interesting and challenging than what we might expect from later interpretations of '*tat tvam asi*'. It is not that we find anything to contradict what we see in the Advaitic interpretations of Acharya Shankara, but nevertheless, we are introduced to a fuller, richer, and certainly more poetic version of the same truth. And the mere fact that so many different illustrations are given to explain this truth is an indication of the subtle nature of this teaching. At the end of each illustration is the line: '*Sa yah esha anima etat atmyam idam sarvam tat satyam sa atma tat tvam asi shvetaketu*'; that which is the *anima*, the subtle essence, the entire world has that as its real nature; that is the Truth; that is the Atman; and you are that, O Shvetaketu' (6.8.7). Immediately after hearing this, Shvetaketu, quite understandably, requests his father to explain further, and we begin to get a series of analogies and illustrations.

### Analogies to Explain the Self

Since Shvetaketu had requested his father to explain further, we get a variety of illustrations helping to explain what he means. Each time Shvetaketu asks for more explanations, we get the same words repeated verbatim, with a slight change the final time. The first instance comes after a discussion regarding sleep. Uddalaka says that when we are in deep sleep, the individual is merged in Brahman. Then he explains:

Just as bees make honey by collecting juices, *rasa*, the essential portion, from various trees and reduce them into one essential juice; and just as the individual juices have no ability to discriminate, making a statement as, 'I am the juice that came from this tree, or I am the juice that came from

that tree', even so, my dear child, all these created beings, having merged into that great Being, *sat*, [at the time of deep sleep, or at the time of dissolution of the universe] do not realise it and cannot say, 'We have merged'. Whether they be lions or tigers, wolves, boars, worms, flies, gnats, or mosquitoes, they become that again [after waking or after the new cycle begins] (6.9.1-3).

After Shvetaketu asks, 'Please explain further', we get the next illustration (6.9.4):

These rivers all flow, my dear child, the eastern ones to the east, and the western ones to the west. They arise from the sea through evaporation and again rain and flow into the sea. They cannot then say, 'I am this river or I am that river'. Even so, my child, all these created beings, though they come from *sat*, cannot say: 'We have emerged from *sat*'. Then he repeats the line from the earlier example: 'Whether they be lions or tigers, wolves, boars, worms, flies, gnats, or mosquitoes, they become that again [after waking]. That which is the *anima*, the subtle essence, the entire world has that as its real nature; that is Truth; that is the Atman, Self; and thou art that, O Shvetaketu' (6.10.2).

Next illustration:

If, my dear child, someone were to strike at the root of this large tree here, it would bleed, that is, sap would ooze out, but live. If one were to strike at the middle, it would bleed, but live. If one were to strike at the top, it would bleed but live. Pervaded by the living self, that tree stands firm, drinking in again and again its nourishment and rejoicing. But if the living self leaves one of its branches, that branch withers; if it leaves a second one, that branch withers, and if it leaves a third one, that branch also withers. If it leaves the whole tree, that whole tree withers. My dear child, in exactly the same way, know that this body will die when that living self departs, but the living self does not die. That which is the *anima*, the subtle essence, the entire world has that as its real nature; that

is Truth; that is the Atman, Self; and thou art that, O Shvetaketu (6.11.1-3).

Next illustration: Uddalaka says to Shvetaketu: 'Bring me a fruit from that banyan tree.' 'Here it is, sir.' 'Break it open.' 'It is broken, sir.' 'What do you see there?' 'Seeds, small like tiny particles.' 'Break one open, my child.' 'It is broken, sir.' 'What do you see there?' 'Nothing at all, sir.' 'That subtle essence, my child, which you do not perceive, from that very essence this huge banyan tree has arisen. Have faith, my child. That which is the *anima*, the subtle essence, the entire world has that as its real nature; that is Truth; that is the Atman, Self; and thou art that, O Shvetaketu' (6.12.1-3).

Next illustration: Uddalaka says: 'Pour this salt in water and then come to me in the morning.' The son did as he was told. His father said to him: 'Bring me the salt which you placed in the water last night.' The son searched for it but could not find it, since it had completely dissolved. The father said: 'My child, take a sip of water from the top. How does it taste?' 'It tastes salty.' 'Take a sip from the bottom. How does it taste?' 'It tastes salty.' 'Throw it away and then come back here.' Then Shvetaketu did as he was told, saying: 'The salt was present the whole time.' Then Uddalaka said: 'Here also, my dear child, you do not perceive *sat*, but it is nevertheless ever present. That which is the *anima*, the subtle essence, the entire world has that as its real nature; that is Truth; that is the Atman, Self; and you are that, O Shvetaketu' (6.13.1-3).

Next illustration:

My child, suppose some robbers have blindfolded a man and removed him from his home in the Gandhara region, and have left him in a desolate place. And suppose he shouts in all directions: 'I have been brought here and left blindfolded; I have been brought here and left blindfolded.' Again, suppose someone comes and removes his blindfold and tells him, 'The



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Gandhara region is that way; proceed in that direction', and he, using his commonsense goes from village to village and getting further instructions, finally reaches his home. Even so, does a person who has found a spiritual guide obtain true knowledge. His delay [in attaining final liberation] will last only as long as the body lasts; then he will attain perfection [will become merged in Being]. That which is the *anima*, the subtle essence, the entire world has that as its real nature; that is Truth; that is the Atman, Self; and you are that, O Shvetaketu (6.14.1-3).

Next illustration:

My child, the relatives of a person who is about to die gather round him and ask, 'Can you recognise me; can you recognise me?' As long as the person's speech is not merged in the mind, the mind in the prana, the prana in fire, and fire in the supreme deity, so long does that person know them. But when that person's speech is merged in the mind, the mind in the prana, the prana in fire, and fire in the supreme deity, then that person does not know them. That which is the *anima*, the subtle essence, the entire world has that as its real nature; that is Truth; that is the Atman, Self; and you are that, O Shvetaketu (6.15.1-3).

Next and the last illustration. This refers to an early belief regarding truthfulness and how

to judge whether or not someone has spoken the truth.

My child, they [the king's ministers or the police] grab a man by the hand and bring him to be judged, saying, 'He has stolen something; he has committed robbery. Heat an axe for him to touch.' If he has committed the robbery but does not admit it, he is a liar. His hand will be burnt when he touches the hot axe. This will prove his guilt and he will be punished or killed. But if he has not committed the robbery, then he will be protected by truth. When he touches the hot axe, he will not be burnt, and he will be released. Just as the truthful man is not burnt by touching the heated axe, such is the case with the liberated person. The entire world has its real nature in that; that is Truth; that is the Atman, Self; and you are that, O Shvetaketu (6.16.1-3).

This time Shvetaketu understands the teaching and the chapter ends.

### Conclusion

Now, what are we to make of all this? First of all, we must admit that this section is extremely difficult to fully understand, especially the '*tat tvam asi*' portion. It is certainly not what we might expect if we had only heard of this *mahavakya* as a simple Advaitic formula for the identity of Brahman and Atman. One of the first surprises is that we do not find even a single mention of the word 'Brahman'. What we find in its place is the very generic term *sat*, and we are not sure whether it should be translated as 'Being' or as 'a Being', as in a creator God. My feeling is that it refers to both, and that the Brahman we are presented with here has a very strong personal side. As Sri Ramakrishna says, the 'Nitya and the Lila are the two aspects of the same Reality'.<sup>13</sup> The impersonal Absolute and the personal God belong to one and the same reality; it functions within both the *nitya* and the *lila*, the absolute and the relative. When it is inactive we call it Brahman;

when it is active, projecting the universe and sustaining it, we call it Shakti, *saguna* Brahman.

The second surprise is that rather than finding an analysis of the nature of the individual self, we encounter several examples of how that individual self merges and becomes one with reality, or *sat*. We may not be told what exactly the nature of the individual is, but we know that its individuality disappears either at the time of deep sleep, at the end of a cycle, or in the state of liberation. We are given several illustrations for this: The first ones show how the soul temporarily attains a state of oneness in deep sleep but re-emerges as before after waking because it had not yet attained knowledge.

The latter ones show the full merging and oneness in the state of liberation. And here we have three illustrations: When the bee goes from one flower to another to collect honey and combines them all together, there is no chance of differentiating one portion from the other. Likewise, when the rivers merge into the ocean, they lose all name and form and become indistinguishable from the ocean. And finally, when salt is dissolved in water, it loses its individuality and cannot be removed. Nevertheless, it leaves its salty taste as proof of its presence. So, when the God-realised soul merges one's individuality in pure Being, one will not be able to perceive his own separate existence, but will nevertheless taste the bliss of Brahman, like the salt in the water.

But we also find a new theme. Brahman is not simply the consciousness found in conscious beings. It is also the life force found in living things. The jiva aspect of Brahman must be present for life to exist in beings. And without life, there can be no consciousness in them. So we find that we may cut the surface of a tree and let the sap run out, we may cut off a branch or two, and the tree will live as long as life remains. But once the life force leaves, the tree will




wither and die. And such is the case with human life as well. This causal nature of Brahman with regard to the universe is also seen in the example of the banyan tree. Without the seeds within the fruit, it will not give rise to a new tree. And even though the seeds are too small to be seen, subtle like the nature of *sat*, they give rise to a great tree.

Then we find a beautiful teaching regarding the need for a guru. We are like victims of a kidnapping, who have been blindfolded and taken to an unknown region. We require someone to help remove the blindfold of ignorance and point us in the right direction. Then we ourselves need to start the journey back to our own home, asking at each village for further directions until we have made our way back.

Lastly, we have the illustration of the ordeal by fire, touching a heated axe as a test of truthfulness. Once we are established in truth, that is, have realised our true nature, we transcend the ordinary rules of cause and effect. Just as the hand is not burned by the hot axe, so are we not affected by karma. The seeds of past karma are burnt up so that we will not have to experience their results, and no new karma will be formed for the free soul. The *prarabdha* karma will continue just so the body can continue to live until we reach the state of final liberation.

So, this is the Brahman of the '*tat tvam asi*' of the *Chhandogya Upanishad*. Not a mere lifeless absolute, transcendent, indifferent, inactive consciousness, but a great Being who willingly projects the universe, or at least the elements necessary for the evolution of the universe. It is not unlike the Old Testament God who creates the sun and the moon, the stars, different creatures, one by one, merely by the thought, 'Let there be light', and so on. The *sat* of the *Chhandogya Upanishad* appears to be a great Being, who provides the life force for all living things as well as consciousness. But the main teaching seems to

be that after projecting the universe, Brahman enters into it, sustains it, lives in it, and is present within it. And this also seems to be the key to the great statement, repeated eight times, '*tat tvam asi*'. Shvetaketu is told that he is that subtle essence which dwells within all beings, in the space within the heart, the size of a thumb and yet as vast as the sky. That which we foolishly take to be our self is nothing but that reality, the Atman, the Self, the ultimate reality, and the cause of everything, *sat*. It is the source of all that exists, of all that lives, and of all that is conscious. That is the true being, that is the real self, and we are that.'

And finally, we learn from Uddalaka's teachings to his son, Shvetaketu, that the real nature of Brahman or Reality is far beyond our ability to comprehend. On the one hand, it is too large to get our arms around it, too vast, too all-comprehending. On the other hand, it is too subtle to grasp, too minute, too elusive. And yet, that is our true nature. We are that. It is in essence the same teachings that we find in the Advaitic interpretations of these four *mahavakyas*, and yet, how full of transcendent beauty and majesty, how vast in its conception, how vibrant and living are these teachings as found in the poetry of the Upanishads. 

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# Surrendering the 'I' in Advaita Sadhana

Pravrajika Shuddhatmaprana

ACCORDING TO ST THOMAS AQUINAS, 'One is liable to think that, because a man seeks to occupy a higher grade as to accidentals, which can increase without the destruction of the subject, he can also seek a higher grade of nature, to which he could not attain without ceasing to exist.'<sup>1</sup> For those who love this world and themselves just as they are, the implications of this could be terrifying. But for spiritual aspirants, it is a fact that must be dealt with. Aquinas is not saying here that there is nothing after death, or after attaining realisation. He's simply saying that what we are now is not our goal. Like a caterpillar that must inevitably make its own cocoon to transform itself into a butterfly, we must lose our lower self to attain the ultimate Reality.

Generally, when people start to practise spiritual disciplines to realise the non-dual Brahman, they follow the path referred to in the scriptures as '*neti, neti*; not this, not this'. That is, Brahman is not this universe, nor is it anything else that we can see or think of. And such spiritual aspirants often begin this by considering everything in this universe to be impermanent and therefore not real. Brahman is the sole reality, while this universe is simply a 'framework of illusion', a term used by Sri Ramakrishna.<sup>2</sup>

But another way to do this, as Aquinas indicates, is to question our own existence. This was a method often prescribed by Ramana Maharshi:

'Who am I?' Or, 'What am I?' What is this self that we call 'I'? If the idea is to negate this self in order to realise pure Consciousness, the ultimate Reality, then how do we do that? And can we really deny our own existence? In fact, what is this existence?

The problem here is that we invariably identify our self—that is, our phenomenal existence—with the ego. We first have to understand that, from the standpoint of our goal, the ego does not really exist—that it is only a part of the framework of illusion. But, because we identify our self with the ego so much, it is almost as if we are asking, 'Can the ego surrender itself to non-existence?'

The ego is a big problem for spiritual aspirants—especially for those following the path of knowledge. Our ego seems to be our whole world. We even carry it into the dream state. We may lose it for the time being in the dreamless sleep state, but as soon as we wake up, we are again engulfed in it the whole day.

The devotees of the path of devotion have it relatively easy. They transform the ego from one that is attached to the world to one that is attached to a personal and loving aspect of God. They do this by taking up a personal relationship with God: 'I am the Lord's servant.' 'I am a friend of the Lord.' 'I am the Lord's Mother or Father.' 'I am the Lord's lover.' By attaching the ego in this way to the Lord through meditation, the ego gradually becomes more and more purified until it finally melts away through pure love, and the real Self then shines through.

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Yet there is something similar in the path of knowledge. Like the *arundhati darshana nyaya*, the maxim of showing the Arundhati star—the practice of directing someone's attention from the gross to the subtle and the subtler—we can take the ego from its identification with the gross, to more and more subtle levels, until it melts away into the real Self.

We should remember too that meditation itself, if done rightly, is the primary process in surrendering the ego. We *practise* losing the ego through our meditation and other spiritual disciplines, but then the real surrender takes place when we have the experience of Brahman.

There are many ways to practise surrendering the ego like this. Here is one from the *Panchadashi* that directs us from the gross plane of existence to more and more subtle planes: 'As the slender, internal pith of *munja* grass can be detached from its coarse external covering, so the Self can be distinguished through reasoning from the three bodies (or the five sheaths). Then the Self is recognised as the supreme consciousness.'<sup>3</sup>

Here the three bodies and the five sheaths refer to first, the gross body, or the *annamaya kosha*, the sheath of food; second, the subtle body, consisting of the *pranamaya kosha*, the sheath of the vital principle, the *manomaya kosha*, the mental sheath, and the *vijnanamaya kosha*, the intellectual sheath; and third, the causal body, or the *anandamaya kosha*, the sheath of bliss. The order here is from the grossest to the subtler, so each of the following bodies and sheaths lies within, figuratively speaking, the previous one.

Because of our identification with these bodies and sheaths, our ego becomes more or less attached to each one of them at various times. So, the *Panchadashi* is saying here that through discernment we can separate our real Self from our identification with these three bodies and

five sheaths, just as we can remove the new inner stalk of a blade of grass from the outer stalks. And in this way, we can remove our attachment to them and realise our true Self.

Let's see how the *Panchadashi* does this. First it takes up the gross, physical body, the *annamaya kosha*. We all know very well how much our ego is identified with the body. When the body is sick, we think *we* are sick. When the body is in pain, we think *we* are in pain. We think we are fat or thin, beautiful or ugly, according to our type of body. As Swami Brahmananda once said, the common mind 'wakes up in the body and remains attached to the body throughout the day.'<sup>4</sup>

To teach us detachment for the body, the *Panchadashi* first states that the body had its origin in food and also grows through food. This is why it is called the *annamaya kosha*, the sheath of food. But as the body did not exist before our conception, and it also decays after our death, it is not eternal and therefore cannot be our real Self. Moreover, our present body did not exist in any previous birth, nor will it exist in any future birth. Thus, it was not the doer of our past actions, nor will it exist in future births to experience the results of our past or present actions. Therefore, the body cannot be the real Self. So, the *Panchadashi* asks, why do we identify our self with it?

Next the *Panchadashi* takes up the subtle body. Though the three sheaths of the subtle body—the vital sheath, the mental sheath, and the intellectual sheath—are closely related, they all have separate functions. The first is the *pranamaya kosha*, the sheath of the vital principle. The vital principle pervades the whole body and is particularly associated with our breathing. Yet it also controls our organs of action, the hands, the feet, the organ of speech, and the organs of evacuation and procreation. Here again, our



Swami Satprakashananda (1888–1979)

ego identifies itself with the functions of these organs—that is, I am strong, I am weak, I speak well, and so on—and thus it gets attached to them. But, as the *Panchadashi* says: ‘[The *pranamaya kosha*, the vital sheath] is not the Self because it is devoid of consciousness.’<sup>5</sup>

The second and third layers of the subtle body are the *manomaya kosha*, the mental sheath, and the *vijñanamaya kosha*, the intellectual sheath, which is the locus of the *buddhi* or intellect. Both the *manomaya kosha* and the *vijñanamaya kosha* are associated with the organs of perception—that is, hearing, touching, seeing, tasting, and smelling.

Regarding the mental sheath, the *Panchadashi* says: “That which gives rise to the ideas of “I” and “mine” with regard to one’s body, house, and so forth, is the mind sheath. It is not the Self because it has desires and is moved by pleasure and pain, is subject to delusion and is fickle [that is, always changing]” (3.6). In other words, our desires are always changing, based mostly on our ideas of what is pleasant and what is painful at the moment.

The *Panchadashi* then describes the *vijñanamaya kosha*, the intellectual sheath thus: “The

intellect which has the reflection of pure consciousness, and which pervades the whole body up to the tips of the fingers in the waking state, but disappears in deep sleep, is known as the intellect sheath. It also is not the Self because it too is changeable’ (3.7).

Swami Satprakashananda explains: ‘Since it [the *vijñanamaya kosha*] bears the reflection of the witness-self it appears to be self-luminous. Identified with the not-self the reflected self asserts itself as the agent. Impelled by self-consciousness in such forms as—“I am the knower”, “I am the doer”, “I am happy”, “I am unhappy”—the intelligent sheath [the *vijñanamaya kosha*] operates on the mental and the vital sheaths.’<sup>6</sup>

The *Vedānta-sāra* lays out the functions of the *pranamaya kosha*, the *manomaya kosha*, and the *vijñanamaya kosha*, which comprise the subtle body, in this way: ‘Among these sheaths, the intelligent sheath, *vijñanamaya kosha*, which is endowed with the power of knowledge, is the agent; the mental sheath, *manomaya kosha*, which is endowed with willpower, is the instrument; and the vital sheath, *pranamaya kosha*, which is endowed with activity, is the product. This division has been made according to their respective functions. These three sheaths together constitute the subtle body.’<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, according to Vedānta, within the *manomaya kosha* and the *vijñanamaya kosha*, there are four modes of cognition: deliberation, *manas*; determination, *buddhi*; egoism, *ahamkāra*; and recollection, *chitta*. Of these four, ‘the first two are considered primary by the Vedāntic teachers. The *Vedānta-sāra* includes *citta* in *buddhi* and *ahamkāra* in *manas*. But the *Panchadashi* includes *citta* in *manas* and *ahamkāra* in *buddhi*.’<sup>8</sup> Here, we are following the *Panchadashi*. These four modes of cognition are generally referred to collectively as the mind, the *antahkarana*.

According to the *Panchadashi*, the mind, *antahkarana*, is located in the heart. But as we have seen, the ego extends itself even to the physical and vital sheaths. This is because the mind also extends throughout the psycho-physical system. But the locus of the ego is in the mind—specifically the *vijnanamaya kosha*. According to the *Panchadashi*, when the *manas* presents an image of a chair to the buddhi, the buddhi determines, 'This is a chair'. Then the 'I'-sense determines, 'I know the chair'. This is how these inner organs function, according to Vedanta.

And if we are not yet convinced of the ephemeral nature of the mind and the ego, we have only to remember how much they change. One moment the mind flares up in anger, and the next moment it expresses love. One moment it is happy, and the next moment it is sad. The ego too does not stay the same. It presents one aspect to family members, and another to people one works with.

Again, we have only to remember how a little boy can put on a Superman costume and for a short time be consumed with the thought that he is Superman. A little girl, playing with her dolls, will be totally absorbed for some time in the thought that she is the doll's mommy. We can easily see from these things that the mind and ego are not eternal, and therefore they cannot be the real Self. As said before, the mind and ego also are part of the 'framework of illusion' that must be renounced.

The final and fifth sheath is the *anandamaya kosha*, the sheath of bliss, and this comprises the third and final body—the causal body. This sheath is the closest to the Atman, so it partakes of some qualities of the Atman. But these qualities are only reflections of the bliss of the Atman. According to Acharya Shankara:

The blissful sheath is that modification of *ajñāna* [ignorance] which manifests itself

catching a reflection of the ātman that is Bliss Absolute; whose attributes are joy and the rest; and which appears in view when some object agreeable to oneself presents itself. It makes itself spontaneously felt to the fortunate during the fruition of their virtuous deeds, from which every corporeal being derives great joy without the least effort.

The blissful sheath has its fullest play during profound sleep, while in the dreaming and wakeful states it has only a partial manifestation, occasioned by the sight of agreeable objects and so forth (70).

Through the causal body, the ego enjoys the fruits of its actions, and it gets joy from other mundane actions and objects. Again, on waking up from deep sleep, the ego says, 'I have slept well'. But this is the extent of its enjoyment. If we want the bliss of Brahman, we have to understand who the real enjoyer is.

As the *Panchadashi* says: 'This bliss sheath [the *anandamaya kosha*] also cannot be the Self because it is temporal and impermanent. That bliss which is the source of this reflection [that is, the reflected bliss of the *anandamaya kosha*] is the Self; for it is eternal and immutable.'<sup>9</sup>

Now, how do we get to the point of realising our real Self? According to the *Panchadashi*, we first hear or read about these three bodies and five sheaths. In Vedanta this is called *shravana* or hearing. Then we use our discerning faculty to understand that these three bodies and five sheaths are not the real Self, and that our goal lies beyond them. This is *manana* or reasoning.

So far, this is where the *Panchadashi* has taken us. The next step is to meditate, *nididhyasana*, and try to separate the real Self from the not-self, just as we separate the inner blade of the *munja* grass from the stalk. When we achieve this separation, we attain our goal of realisation through *samadhi*.

In the words of the *Panchadashi*:

And, when by *shravana* and *manana* the mind develops a firm and undoubted conviction, and dwells constantly on the thus ascertained Self alone, it is called unbroken meditation, *nididhyasana*.

When the mind gradually leaves off the ideas of the meditator and the act of meditation and is merged in the sole object of meditation (namely, the Self), and is steady like the flame of a lamp in a breezeless place, it is called the super-conscious state, *samadhi* (1.54–5).

But before we get to *samadhi*—that is, when we are at the stage of *nididhyasana*—we need to take the help of our will (1.57). Let's take a look at these stages of our spiritual practices and experiences. In this way we can see where we are and where we are going with our *sadhana*, and also how our will is used to surrender our ego.

In the early stages of our spiritual practices we are trying to lessen our ego by purifying it. Though we are specifically dealing with meditation practices here in this article, we have to remember that all the activities we do with our body, speech, and mind throughout the day are important for our spiritual development. If we do not try to reduce and purify our ego in our daily activities—such as by strictly following the *yamas* and *niyamas* and moral and ethical principles—then our meditation and other spiritual practices will not take us anywhere. We will be like a boat that remains anchored at a dock.

But here we are taking for granted that the spiritual aspirants steadily follow these disciplines. Now perhaps we are practising a particular type of meditation and/or repeating a *mahavakya*.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes our meditation is good, and sometimes it is not. Depending on our success or failure in our day-to-day spiritual practices, our mind goes to higher or lower levels. Yet, all-in-all, as we continue this for a long time, we see we are making progress. Our understanding

and discrimination become much more clear. And we see that, when we have enthusiasm, and when our willpower is properly directed, our *mahavakya* practice and meditation move us forward. For the most part, we are able to forget the body during meditation and our mind becomes focussed for longer periods of time. Still, we feel that this is all due to our own effort and will and our ego is very much there.

Then, perhaps after a very long time, we suddenly jump to a higher level—but just for a short time. Perhaps we have an experience of being submerged in profound bliss. Awareness of everything is dissolved in this bliss. There is a slight feeling that we are the enjoyer of this bliss, so some ego remains as the enjoyer. Yet that ego is not our ordinary ego. It is a purified ego. Our ego is getting a taste of divine bliss. How did we get there? Was it grace? Or was it through our own effort and will? We cannot say. But definitely a purification has taken place. And even though we cannot remain at this level, we have some idea of what divine bliss is like. Moreover, we know that losing our ego to it is not a bad thing at all. With an experience like this, we get hope and renewed enthusiasm and we long for similar experiences.

Yet, however wonderful that experience is, it is temporary, and it does not remove our ego enough that we become established in the ultimate Reality. However, we now have some experience of the bliss that comes with losing the ego in the Self and we know it is possible to attain it. And, at the same time, our desire for that higher state and our will to attain it, have increased tremendously.

Now let us turn to Swami Vivekananda's 'The Hymn of Samadhi'. At some point our will moves us forward in our meditation, and we actually experience the universe as unsubstantial, as 'a framework of illusion'. In the first two verses Swamiji says:

Lo! The sun is not, nor the comely moon,  
All light extinct; in the great void of space  
Floats shadow-like the image-universe.

In the void of mind involute, there floats  
The fleeting universe, rises and floats,  
Sinks again, ceaseless, in the current 'I'.<sup>11</sup>

This stage is critical for us. The image-universe—the framework of illusion, which includes our ordinary ego—is there, and we see that it has no substance. And now we are simply the witness of it. We are now identified, not with our ordinary ego, but with the witness self, the Atman. Do we have a choice here? Do we want this fleeting universe? Here is where something comes in to move us on towards our goal. The unconscious force of our will and of our sadhana—for example, our sadhana of a *mahavakya* such as 'I am Brahman'—are behind us. This force carries us forward without any conscious effort.

Now the witness 'I' dissolves in *savikalpa* samadhi. As Swamiji describes it:

Slowly, slowly, the shadow-multitude  
Entered the primal womb, and flowed  
ceaseless,

The only current, the 'I am', 'I am' (ibid.).

Even the witness-self has melted, and is gone. There is nothing now but *saguna* Brahman's awareness that it is *saguna* Brahman—Brahman with qualities, associated with *ishvara*, the personal God. But it is not *ishvara* with form. The 'I' here is the 'I' of *saguna* Brahman, and not of any individual—not even of the cosmic mind. Yet it is still not *nirvikalpa* samadhi, because there still exist the waves of *saguna* Brahman recognising its own infinite existence.



Swamiji then describes in the last verse the final state, *nirvikalpa* samadhi, the samadhi of the total dissolution of everything, including all waves of *saguna* Brahman:

Lo! 'Tis stopped, ev'n that current flows no more,

Void merged into void—beyond speech and mind!

Whose heart understands, he verily does (ibid.).

'Void merged into void', as Swamiji says. Yet, it is not empty. It is Existence absolute, Consciousness absolute, and Bliss absolute. But there is nothing outside it to be aware of it. It is Brahman alone, One without a second.

But if there is no will in that state, then how did we get there? The *Panchadashi* says: 'The mind continues to be fixed in Paramatman in the state of samadhi as a result of the effort of will made prior to the achievement and helped by the merits of previous births and the strong





Swami Swahananda

impression created through constant efforts (at getting into samadhi).<sup>12</sup> Swami Swahananda explains: 'Even though during samadhi there is no continuous exertion of will-power to keep the mind fixed on the Self, the momentum works.'<sup>13</sup>

Here the *Panchadashi* explains the attainment of this state in terms of our own willpower. Others might call it the grace of the mind or the grace of the Self. Sri Ramakrishna sometimes used the analogy of iron filings being drawn to a magnet.<sup>14</sup> There is a natural attraction between the two to become one. In the *Shvetashvatara Upanisad*, the sage Shvetashvatara attributes this knowledge partly to the grace of God: 'As it is well known, Shvetashvatara, having realised Brahman through the power of austerities and the grace of God [*deva-prasadat cha*], thereafter fully taught to the monks the supreme and the holy Brahman that is duly adored by hosts of sages.'<sup>15</sup>

As the *Panchadashi* says, 'Thus a [person] distinguishes the Self from the five sheaths, concentrates the mind on it according to the scriptural injunctions, becomes free from the bonds of repeated births and deaths and immediately attains the supreme bliss.'<sup>16</sup>

But can one return from this state? How is it possible to return if everything merges into the Absolute? For, once we lose the connection to our psycho-physical system, how can we exist as a separate entity anymore? Like a drop of water merging with the ocean, who or what remains to return? According to Sri Ramakrishna, a

person who enters a state of samadhi might keep a thread that connects her or him to the body. Swami Ambikananda told the following story:

One day she [Swami Ambikananda's mother, Nistarini Ghosh] went to Dakshineswar and saw the Master seated on his bed in samadhi. When she bowed down to him, her bangles made some noise. Immediately the Master was startled and his samadhi broke. He cried out: 'What is this? Why are you making so much noise? The soul of a person who has left his body and merged into the Divine might not be able to return to his body. When I go into samadhi, I keep a thread between this body and the Cosmic Being, just as a very fine wire connects two things. If the connecting thread breaks by some noise I shall not be able to return to this body.'<sup>17</sup>


Evidently, this ability to return from samadhi is meant primarily for those who are to do some special work in this world—or possibly also for those who have strong *prarabdha* karma that requires them to come back. In another place Sri Ramakrishna said:

When the Kundalini rises to the Sahasrara and the mind goes into samadhi, the aspirant loses all consciousness of the outer world. He can no longer retain his physical body. If milk is poured into his mouth, it runs out again. In that state the life-breath lingers for twenty-one days and then passes out. ... But the Isvarakotis, such as the Incarnations of God, can come down from this state of samadhi. They can descend from this exalted state because they like to live in the company of devotees and enjoy the love of God. God retains in them the 'ego of Knowledge' or the 'ego of Devotion' so that they may teach men. Their minds move between the sixth and the seventh planes [of consciousness]. ...

After attaining samadhi some souls of their own accord keep the 'ego of Knowledge'. But that ego does not create any attachment. It is like a line drawn on the water.<sup>18</sup>

As Sri Ramakrishna says here, there are some souls who can and do return to the psycho-physical system they had before the samadhi. But their mind as well as their ego have been totally purified, burned in the fire of Brahman. These souls are like a sword that has touched the philosopher's stone and has been turned into gold. It can no longer be used for any harm. It can only do good.

Sri Ramakrishna, in fact, says in one place that God 'can be known by the pure buddhi, which is the same as the Pure Self. The seers of old directly perceived the Pure Self through their pure buddhi' (733). So, it comes to a point where the purified buddhi melts into the pure Self. They are not two separate entities. And as the ego, *ahamkara*, is, according to the *Panchadashi*, associated with the buddhi, that means the ego also has melted into the pure Self and has been purified. It is no longer the ordinary ego. This is why Sri Ramakrishna can speak of the 'ego of Knowledge' and the 'ego of devotion'.

It is all a matter of surrender—surrendering the lower self to the higher Self, and *allowing* our higher Self, the pure Atman, to manifest. And this is why Swamiji tells us again and again to manifest the divinity that is already within us. It is in our hands. Through right discrimination and also yearning, we can do it. 

## Notes and References

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5. *Panchadashi*, 3.5.
6. Swami Satprakashananda, *The Goal and the Way: The Vedantic Approach to Life's Problems* (St Louis: Vedanta Society of St Louis, 1977), 67.
7. Sadananda Yogindra, *Vedanta-Sara*, 89.
8. *The Goal and the Way*, 80.
9. *Panchadashi*, 3.10.
10. *Mahavakya*, literally, 'great saying'. There are four such mantras, or sayings—such as '*Aham brahmasmi*; I am Brahman' (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 1.4.10)—that proclaim the identity of the Self with Brahman. They are each to be found in one of the Upanishads.
11. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 4.498.
12. *Panchadashi*, 1.57. Emphasis added.
13. *Pañcadaśī of Śrī Vidyāranya Swāmi*, trans. Swami Swahananda (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1995), 29.
14. See *Gospel*, 1024.
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# Advaita Vedanta: Its Vision and Possibilities

Swami Satyamayananda

In Whom is the Universe, Who is in the Universe, Who is the Universe; in Whom is the Soul, Who is in the Soul, Who is the Soul of Man; knowing Him—and therefore the Universe—as our Self, alone extinguishes all fear, brings an end to misery and leads to Infinite Freedom. Wherever there has been expansion in love or progress in well-being, of individuals or numbers, it has been through the perception, realisation, and the practicalisation of the Eternal Truth—THE ONENESS OF ALL BEINGS. ‘Dependence is misery. Independence is happiness.’ The Advaita is the only system which gives unto man complete possession of himself, takes off all dependence and its associated superstitions, thus making us brave to suffer, brave to do, and in the long run attain to Absolute Freedom.<sup>1</sup>

THE ABOVE QUOTATION for the Advaita Ashrama prospectus, written by Swami Vivekananda, sums up the tremendous vision and possibilities of Advaita Vedanta.

## The Religion of Vedanta

The religion of Vedanta in all its philosophical phases, called Hinduism, has moulded every aspect of Indian life—its spirituality, ethos, language, culture, and so on. Vedanta is not a closed philosophical system, and so great sages and saints come, verify, and push Vedanta to newer grounds. The fundamentals are sacrosanct but its approaches and applications are reinterpreted

accordingly to new circumstances and expansion of secular or relative knowledge. The latest to do that is Swamiji. He saw Advaita Vedanta as a panacea for all individual and social problems and preached it as such. There is a tendency in some scholars to call it neo-Vedanta but it is not really so. Swamiji made Vedanta practical.

There was always a need for Vedanta but this need has today turned into a conflagration:

a) Individual and social problems are becoming more chronic and we need a stronger and more modern current of thought to counter problems. This can justifiably come from Advaita Vedanta.

b) As a species, the human beings, are braver to dream and dare—not in the old sense of physical strength that brought havoc—and we need a corresponding philosophy that looks far ahead in the future, and which can, at the same time be a practical guide.

c) The rise and spread of knowledge is tremendous and most religions and philosophies are feeling the heat and so become fanatical in order to protect themselves. Vedanta can be an answer to this new human spirit that is emerging as it does not contradict it but *fulfils* the ancient religions and philosophies.

d) Humanity is gradually heading towards a new type of civilisation where Eastern and Western ideals and values are combining. This new culture or civilisation needs a universal philosophy.

Is this a new attempt? India tried to establish a society based on Vedanta for more than 4,000 years. The gist of what was quoted in the

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beginning was what was implemented, but it did not trickle down to the masses. However, Vedanta had set the goal of life to be moksha, and based its teachings on the divinity of all beings. The means is to lift oneself through yoga into areas of the mind, yet unexplored by ordinary knowledge called super-mind or super-consciousness. Persons who could do this were called rishis, sages, and yogis. People were supposed to become godlike, protect the treasury of spiritual knowledge, pass it down to the next generation, and attain moksha while still alive, or at least at the time of death.

The basing of society on the reality of the super-mind was not understood by many foreign invaders, and even today by many modern pundits; that is the reason why there was so much misunderstanding regarding Hinduism. We see how basing society on wealth, markets, power, status, or even tribal or racial deities has killed millions of people in warfare for the last 5,000 years. Eventually, as history has shown us, such ideals self-destruct nations. Then we have the pernicious insane ideologies, whether religious or secular, that have killed more millions in Gulags, concentration camps, long marches, and so on. That is why Swamiji says: 'My Ideal indeed can be put into a few words and that is: to preach unto mankind their divinity, and how to make it manifest in every movement of life' (7.501).

A few contributions of Swamiji in making Vedanta practical and living:

a) *Everyone is eligible to Vedanta*, unlike earlier ages when it was meant for only a certain class of people, like monks and pundits. Moreover, we can just follow the fundamental principles given by Swamiji in his works.

b) *The world's religious landscape has been the battleground of religion and science*, vying for dominance. Swamiji broke the fight on the philosophical level. Science is the search for the Truth



in the external world; religion is the search for the Truth in the internal world. Both will meet and combine their powers for the distinction between internal and external is not absolute.

c) *The genius of Swamiji* expresses his life's work as follows:

To put the Hindu ideas into English and then make out of dry philosophy and intricate mythology and queer startling psychology, a religion which shall be easy, simple, popular, and at the same time meet the requirements of the highest minds—is a task only those can understand who have attempted it. The dry, abstract Advaita must become living—poetic—in everyday life; out of hopelessly intricate mythology must come concrete moral forms; and out of bewildering Yogi-ism must come the most scientific and practical psychology—and all this must be put in a form so that a child may grasp it. That is my life's work (5.104–5).

### The First Backdrop

The three processes of knowledge are:

(1) We go by referring things, from the particular to the general and from the general to the universal, higher and higher generalisations; and

(2) Vice versa, from the universal to the general and from the general to the particular. For example, female and male, human beings, families, communities, society, races, Homo sapiens, mammals, living beings, and Existence. These are called the inductive and deductive methods; then

(3) The other process of knowledge is that the knowledge of a particular thing has to come from the nature of the thing itself; no extraneous explanations are required for reference.

### The Second Backdrop

The human saga of about 1,50,000 years along with the biological evolution of more than four million years has brought us to this present stage where humanity is finding its coordinates in space and time. Thanks to science, we have been able to reconstruct our journey of biological evolution with the 13.7 billion years of cosmic evolution. We can now appreciate our place in the great story that is unfolding in all its grandeur and beauty.

It is a fact that Vedanta, to be truly effective collectively, needs a new level of thought, sophistication, and civilisation, and this is coming about by the mighty but inexorable processes of evolution. Vedanta teaches that the truth '*Tat tvam asi*; that thou art,'<sup>2</sup> the inherent Divinity in all beings, is uncoiling itself and this is the cause of the evolution of matter and manifestation of consciousness.

With these backdrops, we can consider why the possibilities of Vedanta philosophy for individual and social life:

i) Our species, today, equipped with knowledge, is shaping the world around and also

itself. The steps are tentative. New materials are being fabricated, there is new tinkering with genes, developments are taking place in medicine, biogenetics, gene therapy, we are designing new materials, and so on. It has changed the way we perceive ourselves. After a long time in human history the responsibility of safeguarding and developing our destiny is given to us. We are now responsible for all human beings, our environment, as well as the billions of species of life. This is the power of knowledge and knowledge comes with tremendous responsibility that we have accumulated for 40,000 generations. Suddenly we are becoming aware of the great excitement and hope and also the dangers. Our future depends on how well we understand ourselves and the universe. This is also a challenge for our sense of pride in being ourselves. How can we save the environment and be trustees to the responsibilities, given to us by Nature?

ii) Today every science and branch of knowledge speaks of the 'oneness of the universe'. We know that all life has evolved from a single cell that could replicate itself; we share our genetic code with all the other living beings. We also know that we are made of the stuff of the universe and that the distinction between the organic and inorganic is a myth. Suddenly, our mental and physical horizons are stretching to infinity.

iii) With all this power of knowledge and responsibility, humanity today needs an overarching philosophy that will harmonise all its knowledge and accomplishments, while at the same time be high enough to be an ideal and lead people to understand their real Divine nature.

iv) For about 5,000 years, civilisations in most parts of the world were dragged down because of divisiveness. This ominous shadow is

lifting—democracy, human rights, gender equality are the norms.

v) Consciousness is expanding and almost all branches of knowledge are trying to study consciousness. Rather, it is proper to say that all the branches of knowledge are the result of expanding consciousness. This search of the source is the search for our identities and the meaning and purpose of life. All branches of knowledge can be subsumed under Vedanta as a science of consciousness.

Do not think that Advaita Vedanta is something difficult and outside of us. Advaita Vedanta is our real nature. It is ourselves; and this is the best time we can actualise it. This was the great work of Swamiji, for like the Buddha, he too brought Vedanta down for us all. And today, he has become the symbol of Vedanta.

1) As Swamiji declared, this philosophy was practical first, that is, experiential first, and philosophical next. But we can go to the general principle of practicality—it is not about how to sit, eat, or sleep. The fundamental thing of practicality is practice, repeated practice. Vedanta being a mental science, the practice ought to be attitudinal.

2) *Vedanta as a religion and philosophy* has to enter into every part of life and thoughts and the fictitious divisions between the religious life and the world must go. We tend to compartmentalise our life and thoughts and actions. This tendency is innate and also studied. We may be saints in the temples but devils at the workplace. The distinctions between the sacred and secular must go.

3) Vedanta is not the result of exclusive reclusive meditations but the best parts were taught and lived by rulers. They were busier than the masses. We see how the philosophy was preached on the battlefield by Sri Krishna to Arjuna.

4) The Reality that Vedanta teaches is not an

unknown one. It is more than known. One does not have to go around to temples, or tirthas, to acquire it. It is not in the skies or in the heavens. We know everything in and through the Self. The Self is the most known of all things. Swamiji says that in order to know anything, one has to know it through the Self.

5) There are two tendencies in human nature: to harmonise the ideal with the real; and to raise oneself to the ideal. Vedanta takes the latter stand, for the former is a compromise, a comfortable religion; it is making excuses for our weaknesses. This silly life of silly things will have to be raised to the ideal.

6) Vedanta does not preach an impossible ideal. The practicality is in the sense of the ideal. We misinterpret practicality regarding what we like and what we can do. Or as Swamiji says that a shopkeeper thinks that what he is doing is practical. All others are impractical. So we must guard against this interpretation. The ideal is that you are Divine and this has to be brought out. And this same Atman is in everything.

7) The first step to understand about ourselves is to have faith in ourselves. ‘The old religion said that he was an atheist who did not believe in God. The new religion says that he is the atheist who does not believe in himself.’<sup>3</sup>

8) All the powers are within oneself. Don’t blame others. Vedanta also says that there is no sin but only error. This positive attitude gives a big boost to our self-confidence and energies.

9) We tend to live our lives in the past, reminiscing; or we slip into imaginations of the future; but to realise our true nature as the pure Self, we need to keep our minds in the present, giving up attachments, aversions, and fears. This is known as yoga.

10) Swamiji says: ‘If matter is powerful, thought is omnipotent’ (2.302). So by regulating our thoughts and disciplining our senses, we can

be a master of not only our body-mind complex but also of the external nature.

11) Two thought-forces guide our actions: 'I' and 'not I'; this is due to our love being narrowed and broadened respectively. Vedanta preaches oneness and so there are no two forces but one. The ego either expands the love or contracts it. We need to be firm and alert in making the ego do what we want, not what it wants.

We come to the social part:

1) All religions use symbols and images to represent God—*pratikas* and *pratimas*. We spoke of the Reality that Vedanta preaches as more than known. What is better known than the world and humanity? These are the greatest symbols. A human being is the highest symbol of God. This idea, when properly understood and practised, will transform our interactions with others and bring social changes for the good of all.

2) Vedanta preaches an impersonal Reality, but Impersonality includes all personalities—from the creator-god to the lowest being crawling under our feet. This also means that all personalities, whether divine, semi-divine, quasi-divine, or human, are all the personalities of Brahman. It is the Divinity of existence.


3) The world in the future will not listen to limited ideas of Godhead and exclusiveness of believers and also not accept the constant religious conflicts. Advaita Vedanta will have to do this great task of harmonisation.

4) The Vedantic ideas of oneness and divinity, while rejecting ideas of contempt for others, not only helps the spiritual aspirants but also brings about the betterment of society. Vedanta is meant for all people whether in bondage, misery, happiness, or freedom. It removes exclusiveness and privileges that divided societies in the old days. All the social, economic, and gender barriers being removed, the energy

of the people will be channelised and directed to the good of all.

The whole of nature is going back to its source, the Reality, through the mighty processes of evolution and involution, and the desire to transform ourselves. We will inevitably get to that point of moksha, freedom, as a species, and the whole of creation too will reach that point. Swamiji gives the example of water in a kettle being boiled and the bubbles escaping; not en masse but gradually till everything has escaped. We have heard that voice within and are rushing towards it.

The highest truths are simple and that is what Vedanta preaches; when truth becomes complex it becomes lies. Swamiji says that India was saved twice by Vedanta, first by the Buddha and next when Buddhism degenerated, by Acharya Shankara (2.139). This time also Vedanta was brought to all people by Swamiji in order to save the world culture. Today we need to combine the heart of Buddha, the intellect of Acharya Shankara, and the power of Swamiji to make Vedanta practical. Swamiji says: 'It comes whenever religion seems to disappear and irreligion seems to prevail, and that is why it has taken ground in Europe and America' (ibid.).

Is the path very easy? Yes and no! But we must remember that the things we work for the hardest are the very things that cause most pain, and these are the things that pay off most in the end. Swamiji has opened a new path to moksha and this is the path of practical Vedanta—the worship of the Spirit by the Spirit. 

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# ***Advaita: India's Grand Contribution to the World***

**Swami Atmajnananda**

## ***India's Rich Heritage***

**T**HE CONTRIBUTION of Indian thought and philosophy to the world is being recognised very late, especially its relevance to the higher dimensions of human personality. Indian wisdom held its sway over the minds of the ancient Greeks and other civilisations in the past just as it continues to attract the modern world with its yoga and philosophical insight to life's problems. Religion and spirituality were never divorced from the mainstream of Indian life all through its available history of 6,000 to 8,000 years and more. It is well acknowledged today that apart from philosophy, the contribution of India to the numerical system, mathematics, metallurgy, chemistry, and medical science has been significant. Unfortunately, our generation is made to believe that Indians were not pragmatic and they did not bother about development at the social and empirical levels. This is far from truth; it is in fact a malicious distortion!

Indian society was based on knowledge pursuits and the whole focus was on arriving at the Truth. Dharma was the means to strike a balance between external achievements and internal poise. The Indian mind, contrary to what our critics say, did not neglect social and scientific advancement. Here was affluence along with philosophical pursuits until the plunderers came

to exploit the believing and simple Indians. 'It is about time that a Briton completely took apart the imperialist project and showed it for what it was—not about civilising savages, but about brutally exploiting civilised humans by treating them as savages,' says Zac O'Yeah in his review of the book *The Anarchy: The East India Company, Corporate Violence, and the Pillage of an Empire* by William Dalrymple.<sup>1</sup>

The contribution of India to world culture has not been studied properly, and has been mostly neglected, and if there has been any nation that has been exploited again and again, it has been India. Arts and sciences flourished in ancient India and ample evidence can be seen even today among the ruins that have remained after the destruction by plunderers. The Gupta period and the Mauryan period were far ahead in all respects when compared to the Western nations at that time. India was rich and famous like Rome was in the West, not only for its silk, spices, indigo, and other valuable materials but also for philosophical research with two famous universities, Nalanda and Takshashila, which attracted students from distant countries. Indian civilisation survived all odds because it adapted itself to changing times externally and held on to its inner core, spirituality.

## ***Spirituality at the Core***

Swami Vivekananda said that the national life-breath of India is its spirituality and religion,

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just as politics and commercial acumen are of the Western nations. 'This is the theme of Indian life-work, the burden of her eternal songs, the backbone of her existence, the foundation of her being, the *raison d'être* of her very existence—the spiritualisation of the human race. In this her life-course she has never deviated, whether the Tartar ruled or the Turk, whether the Mogul ruled or the English.'<sup>2</sup>

'A striking characteristic of Indian thought is its richness and variety. There is practically no shade of speculation which it does not include,' says Professor M Hiriyanna.<sup>3</sup> Regarding the expansive penetration of religious thought and philosophy in every aspect of human life in the Indian context, Dr S Radhakrishnan said: 'Every doctrine is turned into a passionate conviction, stirring the hearts of man and quickening his breath.'<sup>4</sup>

### **Knowledge is One**

One important point that needs to be emphasised here is that in the Indian tradition, all branches of knowledge were considered as different facets of the one ultimate Knowledge and all empirical pursuits were considered as application of that one Truth. Knowledge or *vidya* was divided into two: *para*, pursuit of *brahmavidya*, which was not different from the inner science or *atmavidya*, and *apara*, pursuit of external sciences. Both these *vidyas* were considered essential and sacred. The premise that the microcosm and the macrocosm are built on the same lines was instrumental in removing all apparent conflicts between the two approaches to knowledge and everything was sacred to the Indian.

The Upanishads clearly state that the ultimate Reality 'which is eternal, multiformed, all-pervasive, extremely subtle, and undiminishing, is the source of all (phenomenal creation)'.<sup>5</sup> As a corollary, if everything has come from the

Supreme, then there is nothing apart from it. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* says: 'The Self wished, "Let me be many, let me be born". It undertook a deliberation. Having deliberated, it created all this that exists. Brahman, having created that, entered into that very thing. And having entered there, it became the formed and the formless, the defined and the undefined, the sustaining and the non-sustaining, the sentient and the insentient, the true and the untrue. Truth became all this that there is.'<sup>6</sup>

The search for the Reality within and without was the only guiding force behind all sciences. The very first verse of the *Mundaka Upanishad* states: 'Brahma, the creator of the universe ... imparted that knowledge of Brahman that is the basis of all knowledge.'<sup>7</sup> The significant question asked in those ancient times was: 'O adorable sir, which is that thing, knowing which all this becomes known?' (1.1.3).

Knowledge, according to the seers, was indivisible and it is this syncretic approach to all aspects of life that governs the Indian thought process. Nothing was considered piecemeal! Everything was seen as an integral part of a larger whole. One existence behind the many, one Truth behind the apparent multiplicity has been the Indian chorus from the beginning of its history. Swamiji, infused with the same idea, in recent times, had discussed with the famous inventor Nicola Tesla about finding the one force that will subsume all the other forces in nature.

### **Advaita, the Search Within**

Swamiji, a strong advocate of Advaita, learnt at the feet of his master Sri Ramakrishna that all contradictions cease when we have the intuitive experience of the ultimate Reality, which is described as 'One' for want of any better word. Advaita philosophy, as we shall see, is the most convincing spiritual explanation of

the ultimate Reality of existence. The human being has been pondering over questions that have continued to bother the human beings since their awareness of the mind and its capacity to think and reflect. Rising above the physical aspects of evolutionary existence, the nagging feeling that there was something that was missing in our understanding of life was enough reason to look for a greater existence, a greater reality, for, there was no satisfaction in being ordinary anymore. It was an insatiable quest and it was not restricted to only the East or the West. The answer had to be found and in the process various other dimensions of human personality unfolded.

Conquering nature and not being bound by its forces gave humans a taste of freedom and this freedom was extended to all aspects of our personality; freedom to think, freedom to rise beyond human limitations, and finally a search for freedom from death itself. Death was intriguing till we found some people, who were not afraid of facing death and who were blissful in spite of the vagaries of life. So, life had a different dimension and this disparity in understanding of the universe and its reality, led to questions regarding our perception of the world and questions about the reliability of sensory data.

Two distinct streams of quest for truth appeared. The first was the studying of the external world to understand its workings through the process of dividing elements, analysing the components, and classifying data—a divisive approach that resulted in various branches of science. But in the Indian context, there was always the idea of a unity behind variety, as stated above. The second and more important way of quest was an analysis into the human personality itself, to find the truth behind all perception and experience, by going within. 'A rare bold and steady discerning person sees the indwelling

Self by turning one's gaze inwards, desiring immortality', says the *Katha Upanishad*.<sup>8</sup> Advaita is defined as non-dual ultimate Reality that cannot be expressed through words or symbols as it is beyond all conceptualisation.

When we speak of experiencing Advaita, let us remember that it is not merely an intellectual comprehension of the unity of all existence, but an intuitive experience of the one Reality behind this seemingly manifold universe. The Truth must not only be known but also realised.

Charles Moore paraphrases Prof. William Herbert Sheldon, Jr (1898–1977), an American psychologist: 'In the West we want to *know* the truth; in India, they want to *be* the truth.'<sup>9</sup> Elaborating on this crucial difference between the approach of the East and the West, Swamiji said:

Just as the Greek mind or the modern European mind wants to find the solution of life and of all the sacred problems of Being by searching into the external world, so also did our forefathers; and just as the Europeans failed, they failed also. But the western people never made a move more ... and there they remained, stranded; our forefathers also found it impossible, but were bolder in declaring the utter helplessness of the senses to find the solution. ... they did not stop there; they fell back upon the internal nature of man, they went to get the answer from their own soul, they became introspective; they gave up external nature as a failure, as nothing could be done there, as no hope, no answer could be found; they discovered that dull, dead matter would not give them truth, and they fell back upon the shining soul of man, and there the answer was found.<sup>10</sup>



Prof. William Herbert Sheldon, Jr.

## Experiencing Advaita

Advaita is an experience that obliterates duality once and for all; wherein the experience is not separate from the experiencer, or in other words, an experience wherein the subject alone *is* and the supposed object was never there. What this experience is can never be put into words, as it is like trying to clothe the infinite in finite terms. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* says: 'From where words return, unable to reach, along with the mind.'<sup>11</sup>

Regarding this Reality, the *Kena Upanishad* says: 'The eye does not go there, nor speech, nor mind.'<sup>12</sup> The same idea is expressed by the sage Yajnavalkya while instructing Gargi in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: 'This immutable, O Gargi, is never seen but is the witness; it is never heard, but is the hearer; it is never thought, but is the thinker; it is never known, but is the knower.'<sup>13</sup> Sri Ramakrishna would frequently give the example of the salt doll that went to measure the depth of the ocean. As soon as it entered the ocean, it got dissolved. Who is to tell about the depth of the ocean now? Swamiji explains:

What Advaita says is that God is more than knowable. ... He is something still higher than known; that is what is meant by God being unknown and unknowable. ... This chair is known, but God is intensely more than that, because in and through Him we have to know this chair itself. He is the Witness, the eternal Witness of all knowledge. Whatever we know we have to know in and through Him. He is the Essence of our own Self.<sup>14</sup>

S N Hampshire says that F H Bradley admitted that 'ideal and perfect knowledge would not be anything like what we now mean by knowledge; it would be more like feeling, in that the distinction between the knower and the known would have disappeared altogether, and knowledge would no longer be mediated through the forms of language or through our limited

categories of thought. It would be direct and intuitive, an identification of the mind with reality', says Bradley.<sup>15</sup>

It is very important to understand Advaita properly as there are many schools of Advaita philosophy. The Advaitic interpretation of Vedantic texts is also questioned by the other schools of Vedanta. Vedanta or the end portion of the Vedas contain the essence or culmination of the knowledge of Vedas, which itself is a collection of all the revelations that sages had in moments of intuition. It is to be noted that all these passages that are found in Vedanta are articulations of the experiences of the venerable sages. In fact, the variety that is found in these first-hand revelations are proof that Reality can be experienced in multiple ways and there is no end to the varieties of religious experience. Hence, the most ancient Rig Veda proclaims: '*Ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti*'; Truth is one, the wise call it by various names.'<sup>16</sup>

The genius in Acharya Shankara found the nuggets of truth in the vast Vedic literature and he commented on the Vedantic portions that are generally known as the Upanishads. He endeavoured to give us a consistent philosophy based on the Upanishads that could stand the test of time by emphasising on a unitary principle, which he called the Brahman or Atman, the basis for all perception; the inner senses and the external organs being merely its instruments.

Swamiji says that the innate urge to seek the Infinite is the reason for religion: 'Why does man look for a God? Why does man, in every nation, in every state of society, want a perfect ideal somewhere, either in man, in God, or elsewhere? Because that idea is within you. It was your own heart beating and you did not know; you were mistaking it for something external. It is the God within your own self that is propelling you to seek for Him, to realise Him.'<sup>17</sup>

The *Katha Upanishad* uses the analogy of a chariot to describe the human personality: 'Know the individual self as the master of the chariot, and the body as the chariot. Know the intellect as the charioteer, and indeed the mind as the bridle. They call the organs the horses; the organs having been imagined as horses, the objects as the roads. The discerning people call that Self, the enjoyer, when it is associated with body, organs, and mind.'<sup>18</sup>

Advaita is a matter of intuitive experience and does not end with intellectual understanding or reason, which is limited in scope. Reason can only point to the Truth but can lead you no further as it is conditioned by our intellect. The great advocate of Advaita, Acharya Shankara is of the firm opinion that '*śruti* serves as the source of knowledge, while *anubhava* is the final result (*avasaana*) of the pursuit of knowledge. ... Śaṅkara holds that independent reasoning is to be subordinated to intuition. For it is *anubhava* which represents the true knowledge, derived initially from the sacred texts, that the aspirant has made his own through direct experience.'<sup>19</sup>

Swamiji also says that intuition alone can give higher insights and take humanity to higher levels of knowledge and understanding: 'In all organised religions, their founders, prophets, and messengers are declared to have gone into states of mind that were neither waking nor sleeping, in which they came face to face with a new series of facts relating to what is called the spiritual kingdom. They realised things there much more intensely than we realise facts around us in our waking state.'<sup>20</sup>

A person who has realised the Truth or has had the Advaitic experience, is no longer the same individual, the whole person is transformed, and life can no longer be the same. Unlike the philosopher who only reasons and understands truth intellectually, the seer sees

through the veil of multiplicity and catches the One, one becomes the One and is no longer duped by the endless mirages that the sensory world forges on common people. 'The wise ones, having realised Brahman in all beings and having turned away from this world, become immortal,' says the *Kena Upanishad*.<sup>21</sup> 'Anyone who knows that supreme Brahman becomes Brahman indeed,' says the *Mundaka Upanishad*.<sup>22</sup>

### Advaita, A Unifying Force

Advaita alone can bridge the gap between individuals, between societies, and between faiths and nations. If there will ever be a philosophy that will appeal universally, that will be Advaita. Advaita liberates the human being like none other and it mercilessly does away with all limitations by saying: 'There is no joy in the finite. The Infinite alone is joy. But the Infinite indeed has to be sought after. All differences cease in the infinite.'<sup>23</sup> According to Swamiji: 'If you go deep enough, all will be seen as only variations of the One, and he who has attained to this conception of Oneness has no more delusion. What can delude him? He knows the reality of everything, the secret of everything. Where is there any more misery for him? What does he desire? He has traced the reality of everything to the Lord, the Centre, the Unity of everything, and that is Eternal Existence, Eternal Knowledge, and Eternal Bliss.'<sup>24</sup>

Swamiji states the rationale behind his Advaitic stand in these stirring words:

I have no objection to dualism in many of its forms. I like most of them, but I have objections to every form of teaching which inculcates weakness. ... I know that truth alone gives life, and nothing but going towards reality will make us strong, and none will reach truth until he is strong. Every system, therefore, which weakens the mind, makes one superstitious, makes one mope, makes one desire all sorts of wild impossibilities, mysteries, and superstitions, I




do not like, because its effect is dangerous. ... Strength is the medicine for the world's disease. ... and nothing gives such strength as this idea of monism (2.201).

Again, Swamiji points out:

If one millionth part of the men and women who live in this world simply sit down and for a few minutes say, 'You are all God, O ye men and O ye animals and living beings, you are all the manifestations of the one living Deity!' the whole world will be changed in half an hour. Instead of throwing tremendous bomb-shells of hatred into every corner, instead of projecting currents of jealousy and evil thought, in every country people will think that it is all He. He is all that you see and feel. ... The whole universe will thus be changed. This is the greatest gain to society (2.287).

To conclude, Advaita is the culmination of all philosophical pursuits that the human being has achieved all through history and in it is a remedy to all the miseries that plague the world. None need be rejected, none need be subject to a lesser status. Humanity can stand together and proclaim unequivocally that 'we are all One in spirit'. Let us do away with all limitations and rise beyond all petty feelings of race, caste, creed, gender, or nationality. We belong to one family, we are all

brothers and sisters in the truest sense; and science, through anthropology and DNA studies, has also shown that we have all diversified from the same ancestral group. Let us then reject the divisive forces and care for each other as one family. That is the only rationale behind all service and fellow feelings. After Acharya Shankara, it was given to Swamiji to once again vitalise the greatest contribution of India to the world, Advaita. 

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# Consciousness and Self in Advaita Vedanta

Swami Sarvapriyananda

THE STUDY OF CONSCIOUSNESS has become an important avenue of scholastic and scientific inquiry. The central question in consciousness studies today is known as the ‘hard problem of consciousness.’ This phrase, which was coined by David Chalmers, in 1995,<sup>1</sup> addresses phenomenal, first-person, or ‘felt’ experiences in sentient beings. This article will explore how the hard problem of consciousness relates directly to the philosophical core of Advaita Vedanta.

Over the last twenty to twenty-five years, the study of consciousness has paved the way for an exploration of new ideas in a variety of disciplines, including brain science or cognitive psychology, the philosophy of the mind, linguistics, physics, computer science, and the development of artificial intelligence. Evan Thompson states that the study of consciousness is not new; a rigorous examination began with the Upanishads more than 5,000 years ago.<sup>2</sup> Evan quotes his father, William Irwin Thompson, who asserts that this work is so pivotal that rather than the usual Gregorian labelling of historical epochs, AD and BC, it would be more accurate in terms of our intellectual development to use the terms, ‘before the Upanishads’ and ‘after the Upanishads’: ‘The Upanishads is a watershed in the evolution of consciousness. Instead of being ethnocentric and dividing all global history between B.C. and A.D., we should really

divide it between before *Upanishads* and after *Upanishads*—B.U. and A.U.—because the sophisticated psychology of consciousness in the *Upanishads* represents a quantum leap forward in human development’ (19).

## Background

The Upanishads are the philosophical foundation of Advaita Vedanta. All the ancient schools of Indian philosophy, including Advaita Vedanta, were concerned in some way with ideas about consciousness and Self. Their focus, which differs from that of modern consciousness studies, is on the problem: ‘How does one overcome suffering?’ The Buddha’s approach was very elegant. He posed the question: ‘There is suffering; is there a way out of it?’ This question defines the myriad schools of ancient Indian philosophy, which were all concerned with the problem of how to overcome suffering; how to attain lasting, profound peace and joy, which we might today call ‘wellness.’ So, in current parlance, their quest was, ‘How does one attain lasting wellness?’, which they expressed as ‘*Atyantika duhkha nivritti, paramananda praptishcha*; transcendence or cessation of sorrow and attainment of happiness and bliss.’<sup>3</sup>

Since our notion of the Self has always been intimately connected with ideas about consciousness, all the schools of Indian philosophy, including Advaita Vedanta, became interested in the concurrent studies of Self and consciousness. There developed a wide diversity of speculation in consciousness studies about what

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David Chalmers (b. 1966), Australian Philosopher

consciousness is and how it arises and functions. In modern consciousness studies, views range from those of Chalmers, who conceives of consciousness as a fundamental reality of the universe, to academics such as Daniel Dennett or Patricia and Paul Churchland, who would go so far as to deny that there is a phenomenon that may be called consciousness.

Each of the ancient Indian philosophical schools had its own approach to the relationship between Self and consciousness. The orthodox Hindu schools such as Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Sankhya, Yoga, and Vedanta, each holds a distinct position on the nature of consciousness and Self. The Buddhist Schools developed very sophisticated models of consciousness and a very different approach to the Self. The fundamental difference between the Buddhist approach and the orthodox Hindu approach is that though as opposed to the Hindus, the Buddhist Schools accept the existence of a Self, they consider it impermanent and so not persisting across time. The disparity of approaches is evident in the views of the Charvakas or ancient Indian materialists, whose ideas conform in principle to

the current, mainstream, materialist-reductionist view of consciousness.

A preoccupation with consciousness is not limited to ancient Eastern thought; the issue also permeates Western philosophical inquiry. In this connection, the Oxford University has identified the 'Five Great Questions', or five salient, unsolved problems in philosophy. The first is, do we really have a free will? The second concerns the issue of epistemological skepticism, which challenges the validity of human knowledge itself. Third is the question at the core of Advaita Vedanta: Who or what am 'I'? Fourth, what is death to the psychological or sentient being? The fifth question is, what would 'global justice' look like?<sup>4</sup> It is significant that four of these five great questions are directly related to the nature of consciousness.

### ***The Hard Problem of Consciousness***

Chalmers argues that for us to understand the hard problem of consciousness or the source of the subjective phenomenon of 'felt' experience, we must contrast it with the 'easy problems' of consciousness. 'Easy' problems are defined as certain functional cognitive abilities such as the focusing of attention, thinking, recall, perception, and so on, which are activated by specific physiological mechanisms. The study of these mechanisms is, by definition, a science of correlation in which subjective experience is correlated with specified neuronal activity in the brain. Thus, it is consistent with the modern, materialistic conception of natural phenomena.

Central to modern consciousness studies is the mapping of neuronal activity, which is accomplished using a new technology called an fMRI scan. An fMRI enables the researcher to study the firings of neurons during specific cognitive functions. For example, certain areas of the brain will light up during the activities of

listening to music or drinking a cup of coffee, demonstrating a correlation between the act of listening or tasting and the concomitant neuronal activity. As Chalmers observes, this research is producing new understanding of brain function. But he asks: How can a physical system, such as the brain and nervous system generate first-person experience?

Take, for example, the perception of colour: We know that our visual perception is contingent on the firing of neurons in the brain and nervous system. But we do not perceive the firing of neurons during the act of seeing colour. Similarly, our perception of sound is concomitant with a specific neuronal activity. The materialist claims that all conscious, first-person experiences such as speaking, thinking, remembering, loving, hating, understanding, and forgetting, are generated by the brain, which is a physical system. This idea is so difficult to understand because our current understanding of every other system in the world is objective and based on our specific perceptual framework. For example, a biologist's understanding of the composition of a table will reflect its origin as part of a tree. Conversely, a chemist will describe its chemical configuration. Further down the scale, a physicist will define its molecular, atomic, and subatomic structures, down to the level perhaps of quarks or superstrings.

But no one would claim that there is a subjective way of describing a table—what it is like to be a table from inside, or how is the table feeling right now? Only we humans speak of subjective experience. As Chalmers states, descriptions of our physical system vary according to the conceptual agenda of the observer, and are, by definition, objective. We, as sentient beings, each inhabiting a physical system, have an entirely non-objective, subjective experience. What is the connection between the two—the

brain and our subjective experiences? What is the relationship between the physical substrate of our existence and this conscious being we find ourselves to be?

I have used the word 'consciousness' so far in a very general sense. It will subsequently be varied with 'awareness,' or 'sentience,' because the Vedantic term, *chaitanya*, is not what is precisely addressed in consciousness studies. The hard problem of consciousness is currently the subject of an enormous amount of discussion that promotes a wide range of views. On the one hand, Chalmers asserts that scientific inquiry will never reveal anything other than information about the physiological aspects of the brain itself; therefore, an empirically-based connection between brain function and consciousness is ultimately impossible.

But there are many who disagree. For example, Kevin Mitchell, a leading neurosurgeon and cognitive researcher, contends that there is in fact no hard problem of consciousness, and that all perceptual experience or consciousness itself, can be solely attributed to brain function.<sup>5</sup> There is a plethora of opinion on this topic, most of it reducing the phenomenon of consciousness to the brain, brain states, quantum mechanics,<sup>6</sup> or information science. The majority are logical, well-organised discussions, until an anomaly crops up.

This 'explanatory gap,'<sup>7</sup> has been starkly expressed in a cartoon: The caption is, 'Mystery of Consciousness Explained'. Pictured at a blackboard are a graduate student and his advisor. The student has scribbled on the blackboard, 'steps 1–5'. Steps 1, 2, 3, and 5 present detailed mathematical notations. Conversely, step 4 consists of large letters that read, 'a miracle'. The advisor is shown as saying: 'I think you need to work on step 4!' The explanatory gap is also illustrated by the Biblical analogy of the changing of water



Ned Block (b. 1942)

into wine. We know much about water and much about wine, but no one has explained how the former changes into the latter. If water is taken as analogous to the physical system—the brain and nervous system—our knowledge is extensive. Conversely, if we take wine to be the internal, first-person experience, which each of us is having at this mo-

ment, our knowledge is again extensive. The hard problem, as identified by Chalmers and an increasing number of experts, is how ‘water’ and ‘wine’ are related. How does the ‘water’, neuronal activity, change into ‘wine’, consciousness?

There is presently a robust discussion in the study of the philosophy of the mind around two dichotomous paradigms, psychologism and behaviourism. Psychologism, which addresses the epistemological problem of the validity of human knowledge, alleges that conditions for knowledge are produced by certain subjective perceptual factors. Taken to its logical extreme, psychologism eschews the principles of absolute mathematics, stating that they become invalid without the medium of our shared cognitive framework.

For example,  $2 + 2 = 4$  becomes an invalid proposition without our conceptual framework. Psychologism is thought to originate with John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Ned Block, Professor of Philosophy at New York University, proposes in a seminal discussion of the topic:

Let psychologism be the doctrine that whether behavior is intelligent behavior depends on the character of the internal information processing

that produces it. More specifically, I mean psychologism to involve the doctrine that two systems could have actual and potential behavior *typical* of familiar intelligent beings, that the two systems could be exactly alike in their actual and potential behavior, and in their behavioral dispositions and capacities and counterfactual behavioral properties (i.e., what behaviors, behavioral dispositions, and behavioral capacities they would have exhibited had their stimuli differed)—the two systems could be alike in all these ways, yet there could be a difference in the information processing that mediates their stimuli and responses that determines that one is not at all intelligent while the other is fully intelligent.<sup>8</sup>

Psychologism is anathema to that of pure behaviourism, which attests that our psychological development and experience is generated by environmental factors operating within a model of operant conditioning. Thus, we are said to be products of stimulus and reinforcement.<sup>9</sup> Our attempts to explain the existence of consciousness—which as an ineffable reality, will always exclude objectification—through the application of reductionist methodologies, creates a logical conundrum. This conundrum is a stumbling block in our search for the origins and nature of consciousness.

Chalmers promotes as a solution the revival of panpsychism in analytic philosophy, a view that was pervasive in early Greek thought. Panpsychism, which asserts that mentality, or intelligence, is fundamental and ubiquitous in the natural world, offers a more unifying alternative to the question of the emergence of consciousness.<sup>10</sup> According to Chalmers, while at present it seems to defy logic, we may ultimately have to accept consciousness as a fundamental, universal reality that is as irreducible as matter, energy, time, and space. Thus, it is a ubiquitous, independent element that defines our perception of

the physical world through the medium of our nervous system and brain. Numerous opponents to panpsychism argue that its acceptance would contradict the present, materialistic view, and defer the question of consciousness until such a time when our scientific apparatus can support a more cogent answer.

### **The Advaita Vedanta View of Consciousness**

More than 5,000 years ago, the Sankhya School, one of the most ancient schools of Indian philosophy, proposed the existence of two fundamental, universal realities; nature or prakriti, time, space, energy, and consciousness or purusha. We are sentient beings experiencing a universe. The entirety of our perceived universe is nature, including our bodies, brains, and nervous systems. Sankhya also considers mind and all its manifestations—thoughts, emotions, and so on—as nature. Conversely, that which experiences the external world and the internal world of the mind, is consciousness or the Self. This insight is attributed to Kapila, considered by Swami Vivekananda to be ‘the father of all philosophy.’<sup>11</sup>

Sankhya is a dualistic system in which prakriti is thought to be distinct from purusha—the eternal, indestructible, formless, and all-pervasive universal principle. But Advaita, a monistic system, eradicates the dichotomy between consciousness and its object. The central teaching of Advaita Vedanta is: ‘*Tat tvam asi*; you are That.’<sup>12</sup> The term for consciousness is Brahman, ‘the vast,’ or ‘the limitless,’ which is considered the fundamental reality of the universe. To give a fuller designation, Brahman is not only consciousness, but existence and bliss absolute, or *Sat-Chit-Ananda*. Rather than conceiving of prakriti as a *transformation* of purusha, in Advaita Vedanta, prakriti is considered an *appearance* of purusha.

You are that underlying reality, Brahman. Not

you as the body; not you as the mind; not even you as the person that you think yourself to be, but as an underlying consciousness that shines through, functions through, and expresses itself through this body-mind complex. As Swamiji often said: ‘Oh, if only you knew yourselves! You are souls; you are Gods. If ever I feel like blaspheming, it is when I call you man.’<sup>13</sup> Not as a body, bound to age, decay, and death; not even as a mind, a changing, limited personality, but as an unlimited consciousness expressing itself through a mind and a body.

In the Advaitic aphorism, ‘That’ represents God, or *saguna* Brahman, which roughly corresponds to the ‘God’ of theistic religions, and ‘you’ stands for the jiva, or the individual, sentient being. This is not to say that the sentient being is God in a literal sense. Nonetheless, the dualistic religions, both Hindu and non-Hindu, ask, ‘this is blasphemous; are you claiming to be God?’ The Advaitin answers that when the limited personality is transcended, the divinity within is revealed. This is an insight that mystics in every religion have had throughout the centuries, as when Meister Eckhart—a profoundly non-dualist, medieval Christian mystic—observes: ‘God’s ground is my ground and my ground is God’s ground.’<sup>14</sup>

Each of us, as spiritual seekers, and each of the great religions of the world can be classified as belonging to one of two categories, ‘That’ and ‘you.’ The ‘That’ category in spiritual seeking is centred around God. When young spiritual aspirants are asked, ‘why do you want to become a monk?’, their replies fall neatly into two groups. One group will give the That-oriented response, ‘we are searching for God.’ The other, you-oriented response is, ‘I’m searching for the mystery of my own existence: Who or what am I?’ Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism within Hinduism, and the great Abrahamic traditions,



Meister Eckhart

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are all That-oriented religions, which are focused on ideas about God. Many Westerners find it difficult to accept a you-oriented religion such as Buddhism, which eschews a concept of God. And yet, both types of religion have proliferated in India for millennia. Buddhism is 2,500 years old; Jainism, another you-oriented religion, is even older.

Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses. That-centred religion involves temples, or churches, or mosques, and would generally have a mode of devotion or bhakti along with rituals. The problem with That- or God-centered religion is, as is argued by scholars such as Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens, that God is difficult to prove. In all the That-centered religions of the world, we find a strong theological tradition of argumentation in favour of the existence of God, as in the writings of the Christian priest and philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1225–74),<sup>15</sup> and the great Hindu logician, Udayanacharya (tenth century CE). This is because the concept of God is based on faith and there have always been sceptics.

The process of the That-centred religions concerns the question of the existence of God. If God does in fact exist, the That-centred religions assert that she or he or it is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. Conversely, for the you-centred religions such as Buddhism and Jainism, or in the Hindu traditions, Sankhya or the Patanjali yoga system, which are not dependent on a conception of God, this is not a problem. These religions emphasise inquiry directed towards the self; and nobody—even the Buddhist, who denies a specific view of the Self—has seriously challenged our existence. So, the subject matter of the you-centred, self-inquiry-based religions—I, me, myself—undeniably exists in some sense.

The problem of course is that our existence itself is fraught with suffering; we surely exist but we are surrounded by misery and death, we suffer from loss, desire, and frustration. If God does exist, she or he or it has none of these problems, because God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. The existence of God is perfect, but doubtful. Conversely, our existence, while certain, is imperfect.

The beauty of Advaita is that by combining the dichotomous you- and That-centred belief systems, it synthesises the advantages and removes the disadvantage of each. The Advaitic maxim ‘You are That’, implies a certain perfect existence, which is also certain. The Self, *qua* self, is certain and beyond doubt, and as infinite existence-consciousness-bliss, is beyond imperfection. As Swamiji declares, each soul is potentially divine, and the process of all religion is the manifestation of that divinity within.<sup>16</sup> So, the non-dualist, Advaitic answer to the central ontological question, ‘give us irrefutable proof of the existence of God’, is, ‘your own existence’. This answer sustains the Advaita Vedanta paradigm because, as Meister Eckhart intuited, our own existence *is* the existence of God.

Chalmers observes that the study of consciousness differs from other scientific endeavours in salient ways. For example, the exploration of black holes, or of quantum mechanics, or string theory, is not a quotidian endeavour; that data is not normally available to the ordinary person. But every one of us constantly has the direct experience of consciousness. We all think, remember, desire, see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. In fact, that which we call 'life' is just a series of conscious experiences, or we might say, experiences in consciousness; consciousness is the fundamental datum of life.

While we might insist that we are only the body, we make that claim only because our conscious mind can affirm it. Everything that we know—what we agree and disagree on—everything is in consciousness. All our science, religion, art, literature, music—everything that we have done in human life is in consciousness. It is the single most important thing for us. Why, then, was the exploration of consciousness undertaken so recently? It should have been the first thing to be studied—and in fact, as is evident in the Upanishads, it probably was.

What is the relationship between consciousness and its objects? There are four distinct approaches to relating awareness to the world, which includes our own body and mind. The prevailing reductive, materialist, scientific world view gives primacy to matter, or the object, and a subordinate status to consciousness, as an epiphenomenon. In this paradigm, life is generated in matter; living matter evolves into more sophisticated forms evolving brains and nervous systems; and in those brains and nervous systems, somehow the appearance of consciousness miraculously occurs.

The second possible world view, which is that of all religions, is the opposite: The universe is created by God, who is, of course, conscious—no



religion posits an unconscious God! Since all theistic religions assume that God is conscious, they hold that a sentient being created the universe of space, time, matter, and energy. The third paradigm, which is consistent with Chalmers's panpsychist thesis, is that neither matter nor consciousness created the other. Rather, they are fundamental realities interacting with each other. The interaction between the independent realities of consciousness and matter is exactly what the ancient Sankhya and Yoga philosophies proposed. Take, for example, the interaction of consciousness and its object in Sankhya, *purusha-prakriti*. Where do they interact? The interaction is us—sentient beings. *We* are the interaction of consciousness and the universe of matter and energy, through our bodies and minds.



The fourth, radical paradigm, that of Advaita Vedanta, is that there is only one non-dual reality, which is consciousness. The term 'non-dual' is added to reinforce the idea that although we perceive the existence of two realities—consciousness and the universe—it is consciousness alone that appears as the objective universe. The most familiar analogy, which is found in the *Mandukya Upanishad*, is the generation by the mind of objects in the dream-state. Similarly, consciousness appears as the entire universe, as the body and as the mind itself.<sup>17</sup>

According to Swamiji, one alone exists, appearing as the soul of nature.<sup>18</sup> Advaita Vedanta claims that this non-dual consciousness is available here and now, that it is *you*; and that it can be directly experienced. The journey in Advaita Vedanta is not a journey in space; there is no need for a journey to another place called 'heaven'. Neither is it a journey in time; one will not attain Brahman after the next incarnation, or the coming of the Christ, or the Apocalypse, or after death, or even after enlightenment. The Advaitic journey is undertaken by means of certain methodologies or protocols particular to Vedanta, which are called *prakriya*.

For example, we have the text, *Drig Drishya Viveka* (c. 1350), which is a rigorous inquiry into the seer and the seen. Another methodology, *avastha-traya vichara*, the inquiry into the three states, explores the three states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep. In addition, we have *pancha-kosha vichara*, the inquiry into the five sheaths, in which one methodically examines the five layers of the human personality to see if any one of them is the Self. These various techniques take us step by step in our understanding and guide us to the ultimate Reality that Advaita claims we are. Advaita Vedanta is not based on faith; rather, it is based on understanding.

Let us take *drig drishya viveka* as an example

of Vedantic inquiry. There are three steps in this method. First, the eyes are the seer and the forms are seen; the seer and the seen are two different entities. The limits of the eyes are the eyes themselves; we cannot directly see our own eyes. The seen or experienced objects are many and perpetually changing, but the seer or experiencer remains the same. So, the first stage of the inquiry is the distinction between the seer and the seen. The seer is one and relatively unchanging, while the seen are many and changeable.

The second, inward step is that the eyes themselves become seen, in the sense of 'known'. I am aware that my eyes are open or closed, or that I need glasses or do not; my mind is aware of all these things about my eyes. At this stage, the mind is the seer and the eyes are the seen. Similarly, the mind is aware of the ears, nose, skin, and tongue; the five senses and indeed, the whole body is perceived as an object of experience. Clearly, the mind is distinct from the physical body, as will be confirmed by even the materialist-reductionist, who will say the latter is a by-product of the former. The same mind experiences different states of the body and the world, which fluctuate continuously.

The third and final stage of Vedantic inquiry is meticulous introspection, which culminates in the objectification of the modifications of the mind. All thoughts and emotions are now experienced as 'known' entities that are distinct from the *sakshi*, or witness-consciousness. The witness-seer is conscious because it is clearly aware of the mind. So, the world is seen through the senses; the body and senses are seen through the mind; the mind itself is seen by the *sakshi* or witness-consciousness. It is incorrect to say, 'my witness-consciousness'. *You* are the witness-consciousness; *you* watch your mind; *you* experience your mind.

When this notion is carefully considered, a



small, luminous psychological space opens between you and your thoughts, feelings, emotions, desires, prejudices, and the like, and the mind instantly relaxes. You are the untouched witness of the peace or disturbance of the mind. And that witness is never affected; it is permanently at peace. That undisturbed peace is known as *shantam*; you are not peace-ful; you are peace itself. The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* states: '*Tameva bhantam anubhati sarvam tasya bhasa sarvam idam vibhati*'; that shining, all these shine; through its lustre all these are variously illumined.<sup>19</sup>

The *sakshi* is *svaprakasha* or self-luminous, and everything in your world shines by that light. All things, good and bad, are revealed by you, the light. Therefore, the concepts, 'my consciousness', and 'my witness', are erroneous. The correct understanding is, 'I the witness, I the consciousness'. The *sakshi* can never be objectified. You cannot know it in an epistemological sense, as an object of the instruments of knowledge. We usually consider that which we cannot objectify, or know, to be non-existent. But the *sakshi* is that which makes all knowledge possible. All first-person experiences such as seeing, hearing, tasting, thinking, remembering, questioning, understanding, not understanding, or forgetting, are illumined by the witness-consciousness, or the light within. First person, subjective experience is the proof of this witness-consciousness.

## Conclusion

Concisely, Advaita Vedanta's answer to the hard problem of consciousness is that there is a fundamental Reality that reveals itself and everything in the universe, which generates our first-person experiences, or *qualia*. Bodies are born, change, age, and die. Minds are subject to the spectrum of misery, depression, elation, remembering,



Samuel Benjamin (Sam) Harris (b. 1967)

forgetting, waking, dreaming, and sleep. These states of mind are revealed by consciousness, which itself is immutable and immortal. All thoughts and emotions occur at the body-mind level, and do not exist at the level of consciousness, which cannot itself be objectified.

Sam Harris, one of the most bitter critics of theistic religion, admits that Advaita Vedanta and the Tibetan tradition of Dzogchen Buddhism<sup>20</sup> contain a core of truth that is worthy of investigation. Harris says: 'The empirical difference between the central teachings of Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism are difficult to overstate. One can traverse the Eastern paths simply by becoming interested in the nature of one's own mind ... the teachings of Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism are best viewed as lab manuals and explorers' logs detailing the results of empirical research on the nature of human consciousness.'<sup>21</sup>

I propose that the concept of consciousness as understood in Advaita Vedanta and some forms of Buddhism is valid, efficacious, and entirely verifiable. Swamiji said:

Is religion to justify itself by the discoveries of reason, through which every other science



justifies itself? Are the same methods of investigation, which we apply to sciences and knowledge outside, to be applied to the science of Religion? In my opinion this must be so, and I am also of opinion that the sooner it is done the better. If a religion is destroyed by such investigations, it was then all the time useless, unworthy superstition; and the sooner it goes the better. I am thoroughly convinced that its destruction would be the best thing that could happen. All that is dross will be taken off, no doubt, but the essential parts of religion will emerge triumphant out of this investigation. Not only will it be made scientific—as scientific, at least, as any of the conclusions of physics or chemistry—but will have greater strength, because physics or chemistry has no internal mandate to vouch for its truth, which religion has.<sup>22</sup>

Because ultimately, that which is false is not conducive to the ultimate good. I offer that Swamiji's conviction is significant. When Swamiji states that religion has an internal mandate, which is absent in science, it is likely that he was referring to the direct, first-person experience that is mediated by the witness-consciousness. PB

### Notes and References

1. See David J Chalmers, DJ, 'Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2/3 (March 1995), 200–19.

2. Evan Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University, 2015), 18–9.
3. See Acharya Shankara, *Vivekachudamani*, 44–5.
4. For a discussion of the five great questions, see '5 Great Unsolved Philosophical Questions', *OUPblog* <<https://blog.oup.com/2018/01/5-great-unsolved-philosophical-questions>> accessed 26 November 2019.
5. See Kevin Mitchell, *Innate: How the Wiring of Our Brains Shapes Who We Are* (New Jersey: Princeton University, 2018). Daniel Dennett gives a seminal overview of modern views of consciousness in Daniel Dennett, 'The Zombic Hunch: Extinction of an Intuition?', *Philosophy at the New Millennium*, ed. Anthony O'Hear (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001), 27–44 <<http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/philo/courses/consciousness/papers/DD-zombie.html>> accessed 26 November 2019.
6. See for example, Bruce Rosenblum and Fred Kuttner, 'Consciousness and Quantum Mechanics: The Connection and Analogies', *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 20/3 (Summer, 1999) 229–56. There are also many online presentations on this topic, which are too numerous to mention. An important one, submitted by BBC Earth, can be found here: Philip Ball, 'The Strange Link Between the Human Mind and Quantum Physics', BBC Earth, 16 February 2017 <<http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20170215-the-strange-link-between-the-human-mind-and-quantum-physics>> accessed 26 November 2019.
7. This phrase was first introduced by Joseph Levine in 'Materialism and Qualia: The Explanatory Gap', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 64/4 (October 1983), 354–61.
8. Ned Block, 'Psychologism and Behaviorism', *The Philosophical Review*, 90/1 (January 1981), 5–43; 5. For a cogent study of the relationship between psychologism and phenomenology, see David Pitt, 'Intentional Psychologism', *Philosophical Studies*, 146/1 (October 2009), 117–38. For a discussion of these paradigms in relation to mathematics, see Richard Tieszen, *Phenomenology, Logic, and the Philosophy of Mathematics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2005). Further reading is available in *Phenomenology and*

- Mathematics*, ed. Mirja Hartimo (New York: Springer, 2010).
9. A systematic approach to understanding observable human and animal behaviour was devised by John B Watson in 1913. It was extended by B F Skinner in the 1930s to include subjective human thoughts and feelings. Behaviourism assumes that all behaviours are either reflexes produced by a response to certain stimuli in the environment, or a consequence of that individual's history, including especially reinforcement and punishment, together with the individual's current motivational state and controlling stimuli. The behavioural model has become the crux of cognitive therapy, with clinical applications in the treatment of phobias, PTSD, OCD, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and family intervention therapies. For information on the spectrum of behavioural interventional strategies, see *The Oxford Handbook of Research Strategies for Clinical Psychology*, ed. Jonathan S Comer and Philip C Kendall, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2013). For a thorough study of the history and philosophy of behaviourism, see B Thyer, *The Philosophical Legacy of Behaviorism* (New York: Springer, 1999).
  10. For a discussion of the history and modern applications of panpsychism, see Philip Goff, William Seager, and Sean Allen-Hermanson, 'Panpsychism', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), ed. Edward N Zalta <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/panpsychism/>> accessed 26 November 2019. Panpsychism is not to be confused with animism, which is considered the oldest belief system in the world. While animism asserts that all natural objects have a spirit, panpsychism focuses only on consciousness. For a detailed comparison of the two belief systems, see Fizan, 'Panexperientialism Vs Panpsychism Vs Animism—Outlined in a Table', *Metascientist*, 9 July 2017 <<https://metascientist.com/panexperientialism-vs-panpsychism-vs-animism>> accessed 26 November 2019. For a recent overview of the subject, see *Panpsychism: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds Godehard Bruntrup and Ludwig Jaskolla (Oxford: Oxford University, 2016).
  11. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 3.395
  12. *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 6.8.7.
  13. *Complete Works*, 5.417.
  14. *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. Maurice O'C Walshe (New York: Crossroad, 2009), Sermon Thirteen (b); 109.
  15. The *quinque viae*, five ways, sometimes called 'five proofs', are five logical arguments regarding the existence of God, summarised by the thirteenth-century Christian philosopher, St Thomas Aquinas, in his book *Summa Theologica*. For a concise overview, see Theodore Gracyk, 'St. Thomas Aquinas: The Existence of God can be Proved in Five Ways' <[http://web.mn.state.edu/gracyk/courses/web%20publishing/aquinasfiveways\\_argumentanalysis.htm](http://web.mn.state.edu/gracyk/courses/web%20publishing/aquinasfiveways_argumentanalysis.htm)> accessed 26 November 2019. For a discussion of Aquinas's views on St. Anselm's Ontological Argument (*Proslogion*, 1078), see Kenneth Einar Himma, 'Anselm: Ontological Argument for God's Existence', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://www.iep.utm.edu/ont-arg>> accessed 26 November 2019. This article also gives Kant's views on Anselm.
  16. *Complete Works*, 1.124, 257.
  17. This concept is to be distinguished from the subjective idealism of George Berkeley (1685–1753), whose term for the theory was immaterialism. Subjective idealism is a philosophical view based on the idea that nothing exists except through a perceiving mind. In this view, the natural world has no real existence as such. It only exists in the mind of those who perceive it and ultimately in the mind of God. From the point of view of subjective idealism, the material world does not exist, and the phenomenal world is dependent on humans.
  18. See *Complete Works*, 2.130, 175.
  19. *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, 6.14.
  20. Dzogchen Buddhism, whose conceptual framework is similar in salient ways to that of Advaita Vedanta, is considered the most advanced form of Tibetan Buddhism, as practised by the Dalai Lama. See H H The 14th Dalai Lama, *Dzogchen: Heart Essence of the Great Perfection* (New York: Snow Lion, 2000).
  21. Sam Harris, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 32.
  22. *Complete Works*, 1.367.

# Brahmasutra-Bhashya-Nirnayah—A Syncretic Study by Swami Chidghanananda Puri aka Rajendra Natha Ghosha, an Advaitin Scholar-Monk

Swami Narasimhananda

**S**WAMI CHIDGHANANANDA PURI (1872–1947), known in his pre-monastic life as Pandit Rajendra Natha Ghosha, was a great Advaita scholar and had translated many texts into Bengali. He was initiated into monastic vows by Swami Virajananda, the sixth president of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. Chidghanananda wrote the Sanskrit book discussed in this paper, *Brahmasutra-bhashya-nirnayah*, which was published in 1943 by the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Varanasi. In this paper, I attempt a brief analysis of this book, which is a comparative study of the commentaries on the *Brahma Sutra* by Acharyas Shankara, Bhaskara, Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Madhva, Shrikantha, Shrikara, Vallabha, Vijnanabhikshu, and Baladeva. I show how Chidghanananda establishes the supremacy and validity of Acharya Shankara's commentary over the others. He also establishes that Acharya Shankara's commentary is closest to the original intent of Vyasa, who composed the *Brahma Sutra*. I also show how Chidghanananda analyses all the other commentaries dealt with in this book to see how close they are to Vyasa's intent.

I argue that Chidghanananda presents the *Brahma Sutra* as a hermeneutic to understand the import of the Vedas. He also brings out the important features of the dexterous style of Acharya Shankara. Chidghanananda presents a table of sutras, where he gives for all the 555 sutras, the topics dealt, the text of the sutra, and the exact numbering of the sutras for all the referred commentaries.

In this paper, I argue that *Brahmasutra-bhashya-nirnayah* needs to be studied and researched in depth.

## The Author

Chidghanananda was born Rajendra Natha Ghosha. He was an erudite Sanskrit scholar and an indefatigable worker in the field of Hindu religious literature. He authored many valuable books and was a great teacher of Hindu scriptures to both the monastic and the lay. He received spiritual initiation from Swami Achyutananda. He learnt Sanskrit scriptures under the tutelage of Acharya Pramathanatha, Yogendranatha Tirtha, Parvati-charana, and Shri Lakshmana Shastri.<sup>1</sup> He was initiated into sannyasa by Swami Virajananda of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission on 11 March 1940, the birthday of Sri Ramakrishna as per the Hindu calendar that year, at

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Swami Narasimhananda is the present editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*.

Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, District Champavat, Uttarakhand. He joined the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission in 1940 at the advanced age of sixty-eight years. He passed away on 30 August 1947 at 4.30 p.m. at the age of seventy-five years at Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service, Varanasi.

Swami Virajananda was a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, whose another disciple Swami Shuddhananda was a classmate of Chidghanananda. We find this mention about the sannyasa ceremony of Chidghanananda by Swami Shraddhananda:

The second week in March [1940], Sri Ramakrishna's birthday was celebrated with the usual reverence. Late that night the Samgha Guru [Swami Virajananda] bestowed Sannyasa on several Brahmacharins, and Brahmacharya on a number of novitiates. Among the newly invested Sannyasins was Chidghanananda Puri. A former classmate of Swami Shuddhananda, this monk was an erudite Sanskrit scholar who had previously borne the name Pandit Rajendranath Ghosh and who through the years had translated several books from Sanskrit into Bengali. ... Chidghananandaji spent the last seven years of his life in Varanasi Sevashrama and used to conduct scripture classes for Sadhus and Brahmacharins. He died in 1947.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that Chidghanananda was given sannyasa at an advanced age caused another old person to ask for sannyasa as recorded by Shraddhananda: 'A certain devotee of the Math, having learned that the Swami [Virajananda] had granted Sannyasa to the elderly Pandit Rajendranath Ghosh, begged to become a monk. ... the Samgha Guru [Swami Virajananda] did not acquiesce' (227).

### Scholarly Work by Chidghanananda

Chidghanananda authored, translated, and edited many scholarly books in Bengali and Sanskrit. His following scholarly writings are known:

1. Wrote the Bengali book *Acharya Shankar O Ramanuj*.
2. Wrote the Sanskrit book *Brahmasutra-bhashya-nirnayah*.<sup>3</sup>
3. Wrote the paper 'Biography of the Late Dr Mahendra Lal Sirkar'.<sup>4</sup>
4. Translated into Bengali the *Brahma Sutra*.
5. Translated into Bengali the Bhagavadgita.
6. Translated into Bengali *Tarka-samgraha* of Annambhatta.
7. Translated into Bengali *Advaitasiddhi* of Madhusudana Sarasvati.
8. Translated into Bengali *Vyapti Panchakam* of Gangesha Upadhyaya.
9. Translated into Bengali in three volumes the works of Acharya Shankara. This work is titled *Shankara Grantha-ratnavali*.
10. Translated into Bengali *Nyayapravesha*.
11. Translated into Bengali *Vedantasara* of Sadananda.
12. Translated into Bengali *Tarkamrita* of Jagadisha Tarkalankar.<sup>5</sup>
13. Edited the Bengali book *Vedanta Darshanar Itihas* by Swami Prajnananda Sarasvati.<sup>6</sup>

It is highly possible that Chidghanananda's oeuvre was much more than what we are aware of today.

### The Beginning of the Work: Mangalacharana

The book *Brahmasutra-bhashya-nirnayah* is divided into two parts. The first part consists of two *padah* or sections. The first section is an introduction to the book and the second section is *adhika-sammaty-anusarena nirnayah*, conclusion according to the majority of concordance with Veda Vyasa, the author of the *Brahma Sutra*. The second part of this book consists of only one section, the third section titled *adhika-sammata-niyamanusarena nirnayah*, conclusion according to the rule of the majority agreement with Vyasa.



Acharya Ramanuja

Swami Vivekananda. He stresses that among the five deities of worship, Dakshinakali holds a special place. This is the same deity that Sri Ramakrishna worshipped at Dakshineswar. Keeping with the tradition of scriptural analysis, Chidghanananda seeks the blessings of all the commentators, whose commentaries he attempts to critique in this book.

### Situating the Work

Chidghanananda places the date of the *Brahma Sutra* at 'about five thousand years ago' from the date of this book.<sup>7</sup> He says that since among the extant commentaries on the *Brahma Sutra*, the one by Acharya Shankara is the oldest, written '1250 years before' this book, 'it is proper to first give some introduction of the book called *Brahma Sutra* on the basis of the commentary' by Acharya Shankara. Chidghanananda mentions that according to Acharya Shankara, the *Brahma Sutra* has 555 sutras in 191 *adhikaranas* or sections while according to some others there are 556 sutras in 192 sections.

Chidghanananda quotes the six features of an *adhikarana* from Shri Vancheshvara Yajvan's *Bhatta Chintamani*, a commentary on Khanda

Deva's *Bhatta Dipika*: '*Vishayo vishayashchaiva purvapakshastathottaram. Prayojanam sangatishcha pranch'adhikaranam viduh*'; the wise say that an *adhikarana* has a subject, a doubt, the opponent's objection, the reply to the objection, purpose, and connection to the subject.<sup>8</sup>

Chidghanananda applies this definition of an *adhikarana* to the first *adhikarana* of the *Brahma Sutra*, which is called '*Jijnasadhikarana*', the section on inquiry. Chidghanananda mentions different kinds of *sangati*: 1. *Shruti-sangati*, the connection with the Shruti. 2. *Shashtra-sangati*, the connection with the contemplation on Brahman described in the Shruti. 3. *Adhyaya-sangati*, the connection of Brahman with the statements of Shruti. 4. *Pada-sangati*, the connection between the Shruti statements explicitly mentioning Brahman. 5. *Adhikarana-sangati*, the connection between the different *adhikaranas*. Since now the first *adhikarana* is being discussed, it will not have *adhikarana-sangati*.

Chidghanananda goes on to give the other five features of the first *adhikarana*. The *vishaya*, subject, is the discussion of the Vedanta sentences. The *vishaya*, doubt, is whether or not Brahman should be enquired into. The *purvapaksha*, opponent's objection, is that Brahman should not be enquired into. The *siddhanta-paksha*, the reply of the Advaitin, is that Brahman should indeed be enquired into. The *prayojana* or purpose for the opponent is that this text should not be studied and the purpose for the Advaitin is that Brahman is to be enquired into.

Chidghanananda points out that while there is no disagreement among the ten commentators about the fact that in the *Brahma Sutra* there are four chapters, four sub-sections or *padas* for each chapter, and sixteen *padas* in total, 'there is a great disagreement about the numbering of sutras, meaning of the sutras, the division of the

*adhikaranas*, the attribution of sutras to the *purvapaksha* and its reply.<sup>9</sup>

### **Agreement of Acharya Shankara's Commentary with Vyasa and The First Speciality of the Brahma Sutra**

Chidghanananda ventures to establish that the commentary on the *Brahma Sutra* by Acharya Shankara is the closest to the intent of the author of the *Brahma Sutra*, Vyasa. Chidghanananda says that since all the commentators of the *Brahma Sutra* claim their commentaries to be the closest to the original intent of Vyasa, one might have doubts about Acharya Shankara's commentary being in consonance with Vyasa's intent. Hence, Chidghanananda analyses the consonance of each of the commentaries he discusses in this book with the original intent of Vyasa.

Chidghanananda says that though there is no sign of any tradition or standpoint or school of thought that could be called as 'this is Vyasa's school of thought', still 'analysing the sutras with great care with the aim of arriving at the truth', it is not proper to conclude that Vyasa had no standpoint of his own as no author desires that one's words be incomprehensible or that there be debates about the meaning of one's words. Probably, Vyasa wanted his standpoint to be taught by the guru to the disciples (1.4).

Vyasa does not give the name of the chapters and does not classify sutras into various *adhyakshanas*. Perhaps, says Chidghanananda, Vyasa wanted the guru to teach the name of the chapters and *adhyakshanas* and also teach which sutra denotes the standpoint of the *purvapaksha*, opponent and which sutra denotes the standpoint of the *siddhantin*, the proponent. However, according to Chidghanananda, it is possible to follow some general rules of authoring sutras and find out the original purport and intent of

Vyasa and logically establish the consonance of Acharya Shankara's commentary with Vyasa.

Chidghanananda says that ascertaining the original intent of Vyasa is 'extremely difficult' and 'if it is attempted by anyone other than Vyasa, they will be deluded, because a person's thought cannot be completely understood by anyone other than the Omnipresent' (1.5). Chidghanananda wonders why Acharya Shankara has not referred to any earlier teachers like Bodhayana (c. 500 CE), the author of a *vritti* on the *Brahma Sutra*. Probably the only time Acharya Shankara refers to an earlier teacher is when he refers to Upavarsha in his commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*.<sup>10</sup> Apart from this, he refers to Acharya Gaudapada.

Chidghanananda shows how the other commentators too have not quoted pre-Shankara teachers and how Acharya Ramanuja only quotes the version of Bodhayana as cited by a previous teacher and concludes that Acharya Ramanuja did not have access to the original *vritti* of Bodhayana.<sup>11</sup> Chidghanananda states that there are different views about the name and purpose of the text popularly called *Brahma Sutra*, and about the identity of its author. He says that instead of trying to explain the sutras with the aim of establishing one's doctrine, one should concentrate on understanding the meaning of the words of the sutras.

Chidghanananda argues that since Vyasa's main aim in authoring the *Brahma Sutra* was to explain the meaning of Vedanta or the Upanishads, the commentary on the *Brahma Sutra* that has been written on the basis of the authority of the Upanishads, with the aim of explaining their meaning is the commentary that is in most consonance with the intent of Vyasa.<sup>12</sup> In order to follow the Upanishads, Acharya Shankara has sometimes interpreted the *Brahma Sutra* in order to follow



the meaning of the Upanishads, even though the prima facie meaning was opposite to that given by the Upanishads. For instance, he does so while commenting on '*Anandamayadhikarana*; the section on bliss'. Thus, it is evident that Acharya Shankara follows Vyasa and does not propound his own philosophy.

Chidghanananda presents the opinions of Mahamahopadhyaya Ramamishra and George Thibaut: 'Acharya Ramanuja's commentary on the *Brahma Sutra* alone follows the obvious meaning of the sutras and thus follows Vyasa. While Acharya Shankara's commentary conforms to the meaning of Vedanta, it does not follow the obvious meaning of the sutras, and therefore does not conform to Vyasa' (1.13). Thibaut argues on these lines in his introduction to his English translation of the *Brahma Sutra*.<sup>13</sup>

Chidghanananda argues that both Ramamishra and Thibaut are followers of Vishishtadvaita and hence are biased against Advaita. However, by doing so they unwittingly accept the consonance of Acharya Shankara's commentary with the intent of Vyasa, because they establish that Vyasa authored these sutras with the purpose of analysing the meaning of the Shruti. Thus, both the opponents and supporters of Acharya Shankara's philosophy accept that the intent of the author of the *Brahma Sutra* is to expound the teachings of Vedanta by analysing the meaning of the Shruti. Hence, the first speciality of the *Brahma Sutra* is that it follows the purport of the Shruti.

Chidghanananda opines about Vyasa: '*Bhagavad-avatara vyasa ishvaravat sarvajnah, tanmatancha smritireva*; the Lord's incarnation Vyasa is like *ishvara* and is omniscient, therefore, his opinion is like Smriti'.<sup>14</sup> Following the maxim that dharma consists of Shruti, Smriti, and good conduct, it might be objected that Vyasa's words should be considered as Smriti.

Hence, Vyasa's words should not be interpreted in a manner that the obvious meaning is avoided. Chidghanananda responds to this objection by saying that following the maxim that 'whenever there is a conflict between the Shruti and Smriti, the Shruti should be followed',<sup>15</sup> even if Vyasa contradicts the Shruti, the meaning of the Shruti should be followed. When Acharya Shankara gives an interpretation to some sutras that is closer to the Shruti and not the prima facie meaning of the words of the sutras, he corrects the errors of his guru's great-guru, Vyasa, and 'loosens the knots of the book' *Brahma Sutra*.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Acharya Shankara merely follows an extant tradition of interpretation as was done by Shabaravami and Kumarila Bhatta in the case of the *Mimamsa Sutra*. This has been explained by commentators on Kumarila Bhatta like Sucharita Mishra.

Chidghanananda posits an objection that it could be that Vyasa has intentionally introduced complexities into the *Brahma Sutra* 'to avoid the misuse of the meaning of the sutras' (ibid.). Chidghanananda draws a parallel with the author of *Khandana-khanda-khadya*, Shriharsha, who says: 'In this book I have purposefully introduced knots in certain places so that the ignorant and wicked might not read this book and play with it. Only the noble, who have loosened these knots through the help of the teachers who are worshipped through faith and sincerity of purpose, may experience the joy of bathing in the waves of the nectar of this reasoning.'<sup>17</sup>

Chidghanananda argues that in reality Acharya Shankara has presented only the meaning of the sutras according to Vyasa's intent, because Acharya Shankara nowhere says that he is differing from the meaning intended by Vyasa. 'Thus, it has to be accepted that whatever the Shruti has intended has only been authored by Vyasa, and whatever has been intended by Vyasa

has only been expounded by Acharya Shankara in his commentary and there is no ground for any objection.<sup>18</sup>

### **Has Buddhism Influenced Acharya Gaudapada and Acharya Shankara?**

Chidghanananda states that the proponents of other philosophical systems like Kapila, Patanjali, Gautama, Kanada, and Jaimini know the import of the Shruti and are unanimous in the idea that the 'knowledge of truth alone is the means to moksha, the aim is moksha in the form of cessation of all suffering' (1.17). They differ only in the prescription of the methods and for this they have to follow the six means of knowing or *pramana*, that is, *pratyaksha*, direct perception; *anumana*, inference; *upamana*, comparison; *arthapatti*, presumption; *anupalabdh*i, non-apprehension; and *shabda*, verbal testimony. Since the Shruti is not the final authority on empirical knowledge, these teachers have differences of opinion that are essentially dualistic.

Further, Chidghanananda posits the objection that since Buddhist and Jaina standpoints are quashed in the *Brahma Sutra*, this text is of a much recent origin. He says that this objection is untenable because it is accepted by all that Buddhist and Jaina thoughts were present even before Gautama Buddha and Mahavira Jaina, about five thousand years ago, when the *Brahma Sutra* was written. This is so because there were many Buddhist and Jaina incarnations before Gautama Buddha and Mahavira Jaina and the ideas quashed in the *Brahma Sutra* existed more than five thousand years ago (1.20–1). Also Buddhistic thought and traditions are mentioned in Puranas and other texts older than Gautama Buddha. Buddhistic thought has also been quoted by teachers older than Gautama Buddha. Chidghanananda says: '*Upavarshacharyyastu bahunam matena Gautama-buddhadapi*

*prachinah*; according to many scholars Upavarsha is older than even Gautama Buddha' (1.23).

Chidghanananda discusses the antiquity of Buddhist thought and explains the dependence of Buddhist philosophy on reason alone and not on the Shruti. He mentions different Buddhist philosophers and he mentions those Vedantic teachers who quashed Buddhist standpoints. Chidghanananda points out that many Western thinkers and even some Indian thinkers like Hara Prasad Shastri (1853–1931) believed that the Vedas and Puranas are post-Buddhist, because these thinkers are ignorant of the *apaurusheyatva*, impersonal or authorless nature, of the Vedas (1.27).

Chidghanananda argues that the allegation that Gaudapada's thought is influenced by Buddhism is untenable and that the Buddhist references in Gaudapada's texts are mainly given to reject or quash them. Chidghanananda says that the word *vijnana* as used in Vedanta and as used in Buddhist thought have completely different meanings. In Vedanta, *vijnana* refers to the knowledge of the true Reality or *sat-chit-ananda*, whereas in Buddhist thought, *vijnana* refers to the *kshanika*, the transitory. The meaning of *vijnana* according to Buddhist thought is dualistic while the meaning of the same word in Advaita Vedanta is non-dual. Chidghanananda calls this a 'great difference' (1.28).

Chidghanananda makes a pertinent point: If Gaudapada was indeed influenced by Buddhist philosophy and followed it, why is it that no Buddhist philosophical text mentions that? Also, the Vedantins who oppose Acharya Shankara also do not state that he follows Buddhist thought. On the other hand, Acharya Madhva says that Acharya Shankara follows the Shruti. Countering the objection that Gaudapada has used many words used by Buddhist thinkers, Chidghanananda says that the Buddhist did not invent the Sanskrit language and one can use



Nimbarkacharya

words as one wishes and that these words have been found in many texts predating Gaudapada.

Further, Chidghanananda says that the Buddhists are considered deluded and are hence insulted by those following the Shruti like the famous Nyaya philosopher Udayanacharya does in his *Nyaya-Kusumanjali*. Chidghanananda argues that when those following the Shruti insult Buddhist thinkers in such a manner, it 'only behoves the insane to hold that Buddhist thought has been introduced by these thinkers into Vedic wisdom' (1.30).

Regarding the objection that Gaudapada has used the word *shunya* and hence is a proponent of *shunya*, Chidghanananda says that Gaudapada does not accept any of the Buddhist definitions of the word *shunya* and that the *Maitriyani* and *Nrisimhatapaniya Upanishads* use the word to denote Brahman. Hence, Gaudapada does not follow the *shunyavadins* as held by scholars like Haranachandra Shastri (1.31). Chidghanananda argues that apart from not accepting the validity of the Shruti, the Buddhists do not have any new thought other than a mixture of some tenets of the Nyaya, Vaisheshika, and Vedanta philosophies. He says:

That the Buddhists follow the Sankhya philosophy can be proved by the book

*Tattvasangraha* of the seventh-eighth century Buddhist Shantarakshita. There, it is seen that the author of *Tattvasangraha*, Shantarakshita and the author of the gloss on this work, Kamalashila cite the four famous Buddhist teachers, Vasumitra and others, and quash their standpoint. ... Therefore, the quashing of Buddhist thought is similar to the quashing of the thoughts of the followers of Sankhya, Vaisheshika, and others. ... The Vedantic standpoint of the falsity and indescribability of the apparent has alone been followed by Buddhists while propounding *shunyavada*. ... We certainly see many Vedic gods and the like in Buddhism. Their worship too is according to the Vedic and tantric customs. Their spiritual practices have evolved from the yoga philosophy. Thus, it is concluded that Buddhism is only a distorted form of the Vedic philosophy (1.33).

### **The True Purpose of the Brahma Sutra and its Second Speciality**

Chidghanananda says: '*Evam cha yavad alochanam karishyate, tavadetat spashtam bhavet, yad granthenanena granthakartra bhagavata vyasadevena shrutyartha-mimamsachchhalena sarvamu-la-alaukika-tattvavishaye vedantasiddhanta eva pratikritah*'; it is clear by the discussion done till now that in the *Brahma Sutra*, Lord Vyasa has, in the guise of analysing the meaning of the Shruti, only revealed the principles of Vedanta, which is the root of everything and is the subject of all that is extraordinary' (1.35). Chidghanananda argues that the other or second speciality of the *Brahma Sutra* is the 'classification and the like of the chapters and *padas*, and the composition of *adhikaranas* and the inclusion of [appropriate] sutras in them, completely following logic' (ibid.). Chidghanananda then proceeds to demonstrate how there are four chapters in the *Brahma Sutra*, each chapter for quashing the opponents, describing the means, describing the results, and finally to harmoniously establish one's own standpoint.

Chidghanananda states that Badarayana and Krishnadvaipayana are different names of the same person. The name 'Badarayana' came because he had an ashrama in Badrinath and performed austerities there. Krishna is his given name and he got the name 'Dvaipayana' because he was born in a *dvipa*, island. He is the son of Parashara and Satyavati. He is Vyasa. Chidghanananda quotes the Mahabharata to support his statement.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Authorship, Date, and the Main Teachings of the Brahma Sutra and its Third Speciality**

Chidghanananda asserts that the author of the *Brahma Sutra* is Krishna-dvaipayana Vyasa also called Badarayana, Parasharya, and Satyavata. He argues that this text is of the time of the Mahabharata and adduces quotations from the Bhagavadgita, Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*, and the Puranas to prove his point. He states that the third speciality of the *Brahma Sutra* is the 'regulation of the meaning of the sutras, *adhikaranas*, *padas*, and chapters according to the subject of the book' (1.42).

Chidghanananda explains that the *Brahma Sutra* has ten main teachings: 1. Only through the knowledge of Brahman can one attain moksha. 2. The direct result of this knowledge is the destruction of ignorance. 3. The first and the last sutras of the *Brahma Sutra* establish that only through the knowledge of Brahman does the jiva get freedom from the cycle of birth and death. 4. This freedom is the freedom from ignorance and freedom from this universe. 5. This universe is unreal. 6. The ignorance is about the identity of Brahman and Atman. 7. Both ignorance and the universe came because of ignorance, and they have no beginning but have an end. 8. This ignorance is not the absence of knowledge. 9. This ignorance has Brahman in the form of the jiva covered by ignorance as its substratum.

10. This ignorance is destroyed upon the formation of the *brahmakara-vrittih*, the tendency or inclination for Brahman (1.44-7).

Chidghanananda then proceeds to analyse the first four sutras of the *Brahma Sutra* and establishes that the abovementioned teachings are expounded by each of these sutras. He notes that not all opponents of Advaita follow the Shruti. Many follow the Puranas and direct perception. Some consider the Tamil texts of Shaivas and Vaishnavas to be on a par with the Vedas. Some others consider some Gurumukhi, Bengali, and other language religious books having an author, on a par with the Vedas. However, the Advaitins accept only the Shruti or the Vedas as the authority. 'Here again, only Advaita has more probability of being the standpoint of Vyasa' (1.56).

Chidghanananda argues that if Vyasa intended other paths like the worship of gods to be the means of the knowledge of Brahman, he would have explicitly said so. Thus, one can infer that the path of worshipping gods is not accepted by Vyasa. He states that *Vyasa-tatparya-nirnaya* of Ayanna Dikshita establishes that Vyasa in his *Brahma Sutra* follows the philosophy of Advaita (1.57). This is the opinion of Shandilya too when he says thus in his *Bhakti-sutra*: '*Atmaikaparam Badarayanah*'; Badarayana advocates the identity with the Atman.<sup>20</sup> Hence, only the Advaita philosophy is closest to the intent of Vyasa and therefore Acharya Shankara's commentary is closest to Vyasa's intent and also is the oldest.

However, Chidghanananda says, all dualistic interpretations of the *Brahma Sutra*, while contradictory to the meaning of the Shruti, are useful because they help increase the devotion of the devotees of the respective schools of thought. And, 'God removes the delusions and errors of these devotees.'<sup>21</sup> Chidghanananda explores the subject of each chapter of the *Brahma Sutra*.



Vallabhacharya and His Son

### Fourth and Fifth Specialities of the Brahma Sutra

Chidghanananda argues that the fourth speciality of the *Brahma Sutra* is the consonance between the chapters and the *padas* (1.58). The consonance among different *padas* is the fifth speciality of the text (1.68).

Chidghanananda gives the probable dates of the writing of the ten commentaries:

1. Commentary of Acharya Shankara: 624 Shakabda
2. Commentary of Bhaskara: 630 Shakabda
3. Commentary of Acharya Ramanuja: 990 Shakabda
4. Commentary of Nimbarka: 1050 Shakabda
5. Commentary of Acharya Madhva: 1170 Shakabda
6. Commentary of Shrikantha: 1192 Shakabda
7. Commentary of Shrikara: 1322 Shakabda
8. Commentary of Vallabha: 1422 Shakabda
9. Commentary of Vijnanabhikshu: 1522 Shakabda
10. Commentary of Baladeva: 1637 Shakabda

Chidghanananda also gives the dates of many Acharyas:

1. Kumarila Bhatta: 544–624 Shakabda
2. Dharmmakirti: 570–630 Shakabda
3. Acharya Shankara: 608–640 Shakabda
4. Acharya Padmapada: 610–690 Shakabda
5. Acharya Bhaskara: 600–650 Shakabda
6. Vachaspati Mishra: 800–880 Shakabda
7. Acharya Udayana: 866–946 Shakabda
8. Acharya Ramanuja: 941–1061 Shakabda
9. Acharya Nimbarka: 950–1030 Shakabda
10. Acharya Shrinivasa: 930–1040 Shakabda
11. Devacharya: 977–1057 Shakabda
12. Acharya Madhva: 1121–1201 Shakabda

### Critical Analysis of Ten Commentaries on the Brahma Sutra


Chidghanananda critically analyses the commentaries on the *Brahma Sutra* by Acharyas Shankara, Bhaskara, Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Madhva, Shrikantha, Shrikara, Vallabha, Vijnanabhikshu, and Baladeva.

Chidghanananda gives the subject of every *pada* of each one of the ten commentaries. He analyses these commentaries and finds out the inconsistencies in the formation of *adhyakarnas* and classification of sutras and concludes that Acharya Shankara makes 24 errors, Bhaskara makes 65 errors, Ramanuja makes 83 errors, Nimbarka makes 91 errors, Madhva makes 170 errors, Shrikantha makes 81 errors, Shrikara makes 99 errors, Vallabha makes 104 errors, Vijnanabhikshu makes 31 errors, and Baladeva makes 44 errors. By this account too, Acharya Shankara's commentary is proven to be the best as it has the least errors. Further, after carefully analysing the overall schema of the ten commentaries in keeping with the rules of forming an *adhyakarna*, Chidghanananda concludes that Acharya Shankara makes no errors, Bhaskara makes 3 errors, Ramanuja makes 49 errors, Nimbarka makes 69 errors, Madhva makes 121 errors,

Shrikantha makes 44 errors, Shrikara makes 42 errors, and Vallabha makes 88 errors.

One of the special features of the book being discussed is the detailed table—comparing each one of the 555 sutras of these commentaries—having twelve columns, the first two contain the number of the sutra, the text of the sutra, and the following ten columns contain the number of that sutra according to each one of the commentaries analysed (188–197).

In the end of this work, Chidghanananda analyses these ten commentaries by every *adhi-karana* and establishes Acharya Shankara's commentary as the best and the closest to Vyasa's intent.

In his unique manner of analysing these ten commentaries, Chidghanananda provides us with a hermeneutic tool that could be used in evaluating any commentary of any text to check its consistency and validity. 

## References

1. See R Thangaswami, *Advaita-Vedānta Literature: A Bibliographical Survey* (Madras: University of Madras, 1980), 340. Also see Chidghananandapuri, *Brahmasutra-bhashya-nirnayah* (Sanskrit) (Kashi: Ramakrishna Sevashrama, Samvat 2000, Shaka 1865, 1943), 1.1. All translations from Sanskrit are mine.
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3. See *Brahmasutra-bhashya-nirnayah*.
4. See Rajendra Nath Ghose, 'Biography of the Late Dr Mahendra Lal Sirkar', *Satgop Patrika*, 1/2 (1928), 44. Quoted in John McGuire, *The Making of a Colonial Mind* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1983), 139.
5. See Jagadisha Tarkalankar, *Tarkamrita* (Bengali), trans. Rajendra Natha Ghosha (Calcutta: Rajendra Natha Ghosha, Shaka 1840, 1918) <<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.324579/page/n3>> accessed 06 October 2019.
6. See Swami Prajnananda Sarasvati, *Vedanta Darshaner Itihas* (Bengali), *Pratham Bhag*, ed. Rajendra Natha Ghosha (Barishal: Shankar Math, BS 1332, 1925) <<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.336405/page/n3>> accessed 06 October 2019.
7. *Brahmasutra-bhashya-nirnayah*, 1.2.
8. Vancheswara Yajwan, *Bhatta Chintamani*, ed. T Venkatasubba Sastrigal (Madras: Venkatasubba Sastrigal, 1928), 5 <<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.368362>> accessed 07 October 2019.
9. *Brahmasutra-bhashya-nirnayah*, 1.3.
10. See Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*, 3.3.53: 'Ata eva cha bhagavata upavarshena prathame tantre atma-astitva-abhidhanaprasaktau shavarake vakshyama ityuddharah kritah; and that is why the great Upavarsha quoted, "We would discuss this in the *Brahma Sutra*" while discussing the existence of Atman in Purva Mimamsa.'
11. See Acharya Ramanuja's introduction to his commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*: 'Bhagavadbaudhayana-kritam vistirnam brahmasutra-vrittin samchikshipub tanmatanusarena sutraksharani vyakhyasyante; the extensive commentary on the *Brahma Sutra* written by the revered Baudhayana has been abridged [by my earlier teachers]. According to that abridged version, the words of the *Brahma Sutra* are explained.'
12. *Brahmasutra-bhashya-nirnayah*, 1.12.
13. See *The Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary by Sāṅkarācārya*, trans. George Thibaut (Oxford: Clarendon, 1890), xvi–xxx.
14. *Brahmasutra-bhashya-nirnayah*, 1.13.
15. Jabala quoted in Kulluka's commentary on *Manusmriti*, 2.13: 'Shrutismritivirodhe tu shruti-reva gariyasi.'
16. *Brahmasutra-bhashya-nirnayah*, 1.14.
17. Shriharsha, *Khandana-khanda-khadya*, 4.205: 'Grantha-granthirihā kvachit kvachidapi nyasi prayatnamaya, prajnanmanyamana hatheṇa pathithi mā'smin khalah khalatu. Shraddha'raddhaguru-sblathikrita-dridha-granthih samasadayat, tvetat-tarka-rasormmi-majjana-sukheshvasanjanam sajjanah.'
18. *Brahmasutra-bhashya-nirnayah*, 1.15.
19. See Mahabharata, 1.1.10, 1.63.86, and 1.63.88.
20. *Shandilya Bhaktisutra*, 30.
21. *Brahmasutra-bhashya-nirnayah*, 1.57.

# ***Sri Krishna in Acharya Shankara's Bhagavadgita Commentary***

**Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad**

**T**HE CHALLENGE THAT IS POSED to Acharya Shankara in undertaking a commentary on the Bhagavadgita is the presence of Sri Krishna at the heart of the narrative. In simple terms, what is God doing here? And of course, those are simple terms indeed, for what 'God' means and how Sri Krishna is that 'God' are questions that can be answered only by going through Acharya Shankara's actual treatment of the Gita. But the tension between the sweeping transmetaphysics of Brahman and an inescapable theology of Sri Krishna is what provides the hermeneutic energy to Acharya Shankara's commentary on the Gita; and furthermore, there is the intriguing fact that he chose to so comment, and indeed, render the Gita one of the three sources, *prasthanatrayi*, of all subsequent Vedanta schools.<sup>1</sup>

## ***Speaking of Sri Krishna and Sri Krishna Speaking of Himself***

The central theological challenge of Acharya Shankara's reading of the Gita: the inescapability of a divine person who speaks and is spoken to throughout. In other commentaries, Acharya Shankara has the freedom to sustain an inquiry into Brahman as the metaphysical exploration of all dimensions of the existence of consciousness.

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The Gita centres on Sri Krishna, not only what is said to and of him by Arjuna and of him by Sanjaya, but in a significant sense, what is said by Sri Krishna to Arjuna and us. We see how theologically effective Acharya Ramanuja found this divine directness, but for Acharya Shankara it presents a different challenge. There is a vast and complex task on hand for him, namely, an exploration of how Brahman is to be understood in all and as all. But this is to be approached only through the persona of Sri Krishna in the Gita.

No quick answer is available as to what Acharya Shankara does in his commentary in response to this exegetical situation. The quick answer we must not be tempted by is that Acharya Shankara, uninterested in the divine person who is Sri Krishna, sought to simply subordinate theology to philosophical metaphysics, leaving a personal god as a prop for the gnosologically challenged, while all the while striving for an understanding of an impersonal absolute. Perhaps this is true of other commentaries; perhaps there is a germ of truth in it with regard to this commentary. But no more than a germ, for given many opportunities to simply read Sri Krishna as a formal symbol of limited understanding, Acharya Shankara does not quite do so. In other words, we should not think that the task before Acharya Shankara is to somehow get around the fact of Sri Krishna's first-personal presence in order that he can work out the universality of Brahman. The more painstaking task



that Acharya Shankara takes up is to read the former in such a way as to make it an integral part of the latter.

Sri Krishna first invokes divinity in first-personal terms in the third chapter of the Gita: 'In all the three worlds, Partha [Arjuna], there is nothing at all yet to be done by me; nothing remains unachieved or to be achieved, and yet I continue to act.'<sup>2</sup> From then on, he gradually discloses himself in the Gita, becoming ever-clearer about his divine selfhood in the tenth chapter, preparatory to the cosmic vision he provides in the eleventh chapter. Thereafter, while he continues his teaching, its reception is imbued with our knowledge that Arjuna has been transformed by his vision. In comparativist perspective, this disclosure could not be more radically different than the Mosaic God of the burning bush who is said to say: 'Ehyeh "asher" ehyeh; I am the Being, I am who I am, I will be that I will be, I am that I am.'<sup>3</sup>

Now, Acharya Shankara does not face the direct and deep mystery of what an aniconic God's apparently tautological first-personal description can mean. In the Gita, the first-personal speaker says at great length, rather than in an enigmatic pinpoint, what 'I' am. Rather than permitting description to collapse into the mystery of divine self-proclamation, the Gita allows it to flourish exuberantly, seeking to exhaust language in order to indicate the divine presence, who is in excess of language. In this, it more naturally follows the *via eminentiae*, relating qualities that spring from the human, in the automatic sense that they are expressed in language, pre-eminently or perfectly in Sri Krishna.<sup>4</sup> The striking point, in comparativist terms, is not so much that Arjuna so approaches Sri Krishna but that the text takes Sri Krishna to describe himself in this manner. And the more detailed these descriptions, the more challenging it may



Sri Krishna's Image on the Wall of Hazara Rama Temple, Hampi

seem for Acharya Shankara to relate this proliferation, naturally personalistic, because they are derived by definition from qualities understandable only by virtue of being human, to Brahman.

Acharya Shankara has to work out how Sri Krishna—robustly limited as the very specific being at the heart of the narrative, using language, even at its limits, necessarily structured in his disclosure through the grammatical imperative of the first person—can yet advert to Brahman as Acharya Shankara understands it. How to handle this being who speaks not just of being but what permits being as such, to be, and identifies himself thus?

The Gita does not, whether problematically or helpfully, allow easy identification of Sri Krishna and Brahman or smooth passage between the confusing if conventional categories of the personal and the impersonal. Where Sri Krishna declares anything about himself in relation to Brahman, much depends on how he is read; and indeed, the vivid contrasts between Acharya Shankara and Acharya Ramanuja on the divine self turn on such exegetical divergence. But Sri Krishna does not call himself Brahman as such in the Gita itself; of course, saying that Sri Krishna is Brahman is nothing notable, for Brahman is all. So what he means in relation to Brahman is something

Acharya Shankara has to bring out through his glossing of relational terms. Acharya Shankara uses a range of names for Sri Krishna, some directly found in the Gita, which he uses freely, and others derived from the tradition that developed in the intervening centuries, by which Sri Krishna was identified with Vishnu or Narayana.

Sri Krishna is *ishvara*, a term drawing on root meanings of capability and sovereignty, and therefore most familiarly translated as 'God'; and also, *maheshvara*, 'great God', sometimes implying a distinction from other smaller gods, but dominantly, indicating maximal ownership of divine qualities. He is also *bhagavat*, a term also used for the Buddha, with a root meaning of 'the dispenser' or 'patron', and usually translated as 'the Lord'. Then there are the epithets for Sri Krishna that arise from the narrative surrounding the Gita, where he is Vasudeva, the son of Vasudeva, and the like. There is, then, not only the task of interpreting the first-personal uses of Sri Krishna about himself, where he adverts to his divinity, but also the second-personal uses by Arjuna in describing him. Sri Krishna speaking of himself and Arjuna speaking of Sri Krishna, both provide opportunities for talking of God or rather, translationally, what 'God' means; the question is how such talk relates to the Brahman with which Acharya Shankara is concerned.

### **To Brahman via Sri Krishna: Two Tactics**

Generally, Acharya Shankara uses two hermeneutical tactics to get to Brahman via Sri Krishna's first-personally articulate presence. First, he notes the rare occasions that Sri Krishna says he is the Atman; and much more often, emphasises many of Sri Krishna's self-declarations by identifying him with Atman or the supreme self, *paramatman*. Second, he often uses a locution when talking of Sri Krishna, 'God, called Narayana', *narayanakhyam*, or 'Brahman, called

Vasudeva', *brahmasvasudevakhyam*, that inserts an awareness of the necessary limitation of language in the usage of a name, *nama*, even the name of God. Let us look at these in turn.

Let us provisionally understand the 'self' as the abstract, core or inner consciousness. It is the linguistic signifier of the subject that renders inquiry meaningful and possible. It is through there being self that there is both the misunderstanding of the nature of being and the capacity for realising the way that there is being at all. It is, to start with, who is. Sri Krishna declares that the cognisant one, *jnani* is 'indeed the self', *atmaiva*.<sup>5</sup> Here, Acharya Shankara explicates the implicit reflexivity: he glosses it as 'not another', *nanyah*. This would be emptily tautological, if we did not consider the import of 'self' here. The cognisant one, he explains, focuses on the thought: 'I myself am the Lord Vasudeva, none else.'<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the true implication of self, the only self that is self, is Sri Krishna. Seen this way, Sri Krishna's statement in the following verse, that the cognisant one realises that 'Vasudeva is all, *sarvam*'<sup>7</sup> indicates that such a one 'realises me as the self of all'.<sup>8</sup> Later, Sri Krishna says: 'I am self, one who has conquered sleep, dwelling as the resting-place of all beings.'<sup>9</sup> Acharya Shankara reads Atman here as the innermost self, *pratyagatman*, by which time we have become habituated to his repeated and anticipatory equation of Sri Krishna with Atman. As we explore the use and range of Atman, we will gradually come to see the universal scope of this equation.

The rigorous selfhood of Sri Krishna is driven home in Acharya Shankara's brief commentary, where Sri Krishna says that people deprived of wisdom 'resort to other deities', *prapadyante'nyadevatah* (ibid.). Acharya Shankara expands this as 'resort to deities other than, *anyat*, Vasudeva who is self,

*vasudevad-atmano'nya*.<sup>10</sup> The hierarchy of deities emerging in the composition of the Gita is not the point here for Acharya Shankara;<sup>11</sup> the distinction between the gods of ritual worship and Sri Krishna comes through the latter's identity with the selfhood of all who worship in the first place. The source of the possibility of worship is the subject who worships, and that subject is, although not in any experientially or linguistically transparent way, Sri Krishna. All other deities, *devatah*, are objects of worship, and therefore elements of that world, different from and yet not-other than Brahman, self, or Sri Krishna.

Sri Krishna, then, is centred by Acharya Shankara through the identification with self, so that Sri Krishna's 'I' preserves layers of meaning that peel away to reveal the very notion of self, the self of all. Acharya Shankara's tactic is to take Sri Krishna's speaking of himself at face value, not challenging the routine self-proclamation of a personal God but reading it as the mapping of self on self. Sri Krishna as self becomes the key that unlocks statements of Sri Krishna's self-statement of divinity. Sri Krishna says: 'The unintelligent think of me as having become manifest even though I am unmanifest, not knowing of my being in the highest, which is immutable and unsurpassable.'<sup>12</sup> Acharya Shankara explains this as the undiscerning not being aware of Sri Krishna's being in the highest, that is, Sri Krishna's being of 'the very form of the highest self', free of mutability, none more eminent, taking Sri Krishna to be the hidden that has become the revealed now, although Sri Krishna is 'the ever-established' God.

Acharya Shankara therefore asserts the greatest intimacy possible between us and another, that of identity. Dull-wittedly, people interpret the physical presence of Sri Krishna in that time as a manifestation of the hidden God, an interpretation in whose narrative sequence the

ontological distance of otherness between the divine and the human is always preserved. But the God who is in excess of both visible and invisible being, as we have already noted in the first section, is the supreme construal of selfhood, for self is nothing to become known, as in the third-personal story of a manifest God hitherto hidden, but that which is always and unquestionably established for itself.

The second tactic found in Acharya Shankara's curious formulation, 'called Vasudeva', one might even say, 'so-called Vasudeva'. Right in the introduction to his commentary on the Gita, he offers a potent precis of how he will approach the whole matter of the Gita. This sacred text, he says, reveals the supreme reality, called Vasudeva, the being that signifies Brahman in the highest as its subject matter.<sup>13</sup> Let us note the first occurrence of this locution, 'called Vasudeva'. Why not, we can ask ourselves, just 'Vasudeva, the supreme reality'? Ramanuja conspicuously does not use this locution. In another instance, Sri Krishna declares: 'I am the source of all.'<sup>14</sup> Acharya Shankara glosses 'I' as 'the supreme Brahman called Vasudeva'.<sup>15</sup>

At first, we may think that this is indicative of an apophatic move, calling him 'Vasudeva' does not actually name God, it is only a name for God that we use as 'Narayana' and the like. So one might think that Acharya Shankara is indicating that God escapes naming; God alone properly uses the 'I',<sup>16</sup> but when we attempt to describe God, we are left with names, which we give. But there is nothing else in what Acharya Shankara says that suggests that he was concerned specifically with the unnameability of Sri Krishna. This is because of the extremely significant fact that Sri Krishna speaks in the first person in the Gita; he has, as it were, named himself for us. It is God's declaration that he is so named; we begin with it. So we must look for some other



Acharya Shankara's Image at  
Kutajadri Sarvajnapith

explanation for Acharya Shankara's locution.

My suggestion is that the locution points to something deeper than the limitation of our speaking of God. It points to the limitation of God as that of which we speak.

We speak here of God—Sri Krishna, Narayana, Vas-

udeva—so-called. What we speak of is God, but God is what can be spoken of Brahman, about which, profoundly, we cannot speak. God becomes the way language mediates consciousness' understanding of itself, self that it is, as Brahman. God is, of course, Brahman; there is nothing other than Brahman. God is also what we can call Brahman, since, Brahman, we cannot call anything, but only realise as self. We must be careful here, as I do not want to lurch back to one conventional understanding of Acharya Shankara, namely that he thinks God is a limitation, a distraction, a construct to be transcended—in the Gita, at any rate, he makes no such move. What I am trying to say is that Acharya Shankara uses the locution, 'so-called', to indicate how the phenomenological inquiry into Brahman, towards which the exegetical authority of the Gita points, is made possible only through language, and Sri Krishna is the self-signifier of the promise that such inquiry can be undertaken.

In these two ways, then, Acharya Shankara indicates how Sri Krishna is central to the non-duality of self and Brahman, of God and Brahman, and world and Brahman. It is in the light

of these ideas that we can understand an occasion where Acharya Shankara brings the two tactics together. Where Sri Krishna says, 'I am the origin of all', Acharya Shankara glosses the 'I' as 'supreme Brahman, called Vasudeva'.

### **Who and/or What is God? Acharya Shankara's Sri Krishna Theology**

The two broad tactics considered in the previous section can therefore be identified as Acharya Shankara's reading of Sri Krishna within his exposition of Brahman, *brahmavada*. They are meant to permit Sri Krishna's declarations to be received theologically, but without disturbing Acharya Shankara's understanding of Brahman as the *terminus ad quem* of the non-dualist task. But, for the purposes of enunciating a theory of Brahman, which is also a guide to the re/attainment of Brahman by the theorist and his adherents, the Gita is a difficult text. It has to be read, first and foremost on its own terms as offering a theology of Sri Krishna. Acharya Shankara does not seek to discard, or even deflect the theological promise on offer. It is only obliquely that we come to see what he does with the theology, in its location within a *brahmavada*.

So, we must first look at how Acharya Shankara reads the theology of Sri Krishna. Understanding how Acharya Shankara understands Sri Krishna will help locate Sri Krishna within Acharya Shankara's theory of Brahman, *brahmavada*, not just as something he had to attend to, perhaps for the historical reason that Sri Krishna or Vishnu and the Gita had become too important to ignore, but as vital to his exploration of reality. In this section, we will discuss various things that Sri Krishna says about himself in the Gita and how Acharya Shankara receives him theologically.

Acharya Shankara does not see Sri Krishna as a creator god, a being whole and distinct before there is creation, bringing beings and things

into existence *ex nihilo*, and continuing to have a being distinct from all beings thus created. He reads Sri Krishna's statements about his power in relation to beings and things in a way that does not challenge Sri Krishna's divinity, yet subtly re-presents it within a metaphysics of non-duality. Sri Krishna talks of his evolutive nature, *prakriti*<sup>17</sup> as having an inferior and a superior form.<sup>18</sup> The former is material and includes the elements, as well as the mind and the 'I'-maker, *ahamkara*, which is to say, the physical conditions of individuation. The latter consists in the individual beings, by which the world is upheld.

Acharya Shankara accepts these declarations with only a little exposition. He glosses Sri Krishna's mention of 'this other, higher nature of mine' (7.5) as 'my pure, self-being', so that the individual beings are not taken as other than Sri Krishna's own being.<sup>19</sup> This then casts the next verse, in which Sri Krishna says he is the womb or origin of all beings and their birth and dissolution, in a rather different metaphysical light; for what Sri Krishna is saying is therefore not to be understood as a story of creation and destruction of beings separate from him, but a cosmogonic narrative of the self-expression of being itself, in its coming forth in a manifold of individuation and its going back to being alone—pure Being, being as such, being beyond the phenomenology of individuated beings.<sup>20</sup>

Sri Krishna says soon after that people are deluded by the qualitative diversity of the world in which they find themselves, and this manifold becomes difficult for them to go beyond; therefore, Sri Krishna says, they 'cross over' by taking refuge in him (7.13–4). Acharya Shankara does not here directly take up maya's metaphysical status according to Advaita, as the phenomenal appearance of changeable things that is less than real, a construal that Ramanuja, of course, explicitly rules out in his commentary on the verse.

Here, Acharya Shankara's aim is to identify precisely what it is about Sri Krishna that prompts our seeking refuge in him; and yet again he does this by saying who and what the Sri Krishna is who speaks thus of himself. The 'I' of Sri Krishna, he says, refers to 'the conjuring master of maya, the being that is itself the self of all.'<sup>21</sup> It should also be added that he reads 'to take refuge' to be 'to forsake all ritually enjoined action'; its full significance can be seen in Gita's last chapter's consideration,<sup>22</sup> but we can see that this austere and disciplinary gloss is an unobvious way to understand the devotional implications of taking refuge. Without denying Sri Krishna's theological claim, Acharya Shankara nevertheless presents what is going on in these verses as essentially a gnoseological project of self-realisation expressed through the mediating reality of Sri Krishna.

Acharya Shankara's theology of Sri Krishna therefore is not some simple denial or even marginalisation of theology itself: nowhere in his commentary on the Gita does he suggest that God is a conceptual construct driven by human need; he does not even say that God, Sri Krishna or Vishnu or Narayana, is the provisional goal of the cognitively underdeveloped, a sort of culturally conditioned penultimate absolute. At the same time, Sri Krishna is not the culminating point of his inquiry, nor is a devotional love of God the ultimate human mode of fulfilment. Let us look further at his treatment of Sri Krishna, especially Sri Krishna's self-declarations, before we sum up what Acharya Shankara takes Sri Krishna to be.

### ***Sri Krishna's Role in Acharya Shankara's Theology***

What is the role of a theology of Sri Krishna for Acharya Shankara? We can say, broadly, that his answer clusters around two types of answers.

One concerns loving devotion, bhakti, towards the self-declared God who is found in the person of Sri Krishna, and is interesting because of the way Acharya Shankara takes such passages in the Gita and makes them point to something else, even while never denying devotion and the complex of ritual life. The other is the invocation of Sri Krishna's selfhood that Acharya Shankara sees as key to the rationality of spiritual life, what we might call, in a cumbersome way, a gnoseo-phenomenology of consciousness. Let us look at each in turn.

Acharya Shankara's location of devotion within a larger spiritual project of inquiry is not a simple denigration of the former. The second chapter of the Gita is given over to gnostic discipline, jnana yoga, and the discipline of ethico-ritual action, karma yoga. Sri Krishna says that, having taught of the discernment that comes from Sankhya, which here stands for the path of knowledge, and therefore for gnostic discipline, he will now talk of what comes from yoga—here, the system of consciousness-controlling practice, and implying the path of action, and therefore of ritual and worship—which will lead to freedom from bondage (2.39). But Acharya Shankara goes out of his way to say that disciplined action, karma yoga, is not only the discipline of spiritual absorption, samadhi yoga, but also the performance of rites with detachment, for 'the adoration of God'.<sup>23</sup> This act of adoration leads to the discarding of all action itself, by the attainment of 'the gnosis caused by God's grace,' *ishvara-prasada nimitta jnana*. Such gnosis is, of course, the realisation in consciousness of the non-duality of self, God, and Brahman. Acharya Shankara therefore maintains that the gnostic path is also a devotional one.

But for all that, the devotional path is more importantly also a gnostic one. Acharya Shankara reconstructs as gnoseology Sri Krishna's teaching

that the supreme person 'within whom stand all beings', is reached through singular devotion.<sup>24</sup> First, he analyses 'purusha' as 'residing or resting in the whole of the fortress, of the body, or heart or intellect, that is, the human being'.<sup>25</sup> In other words, the supreme person, God, is that which is, supremely, the self of beings. Second, he crisply states that the singular 'devotion', bhakti, encouraged here is that which is characterised as gnosis, *jnana-lakshana*: '*Bhaktya labhyastu jnana-lakshanaya ananyaya atmavishayaya*.' So, the love of God is a signifier of insight into non-duality. That is its true and ultimate function. One role for the theology of Sri Krishna is to transmute devotion into gnosis: the presence and promise of Sri Krishna permits the human response of love to become a path to self-realisation, while Sri Krishna's grace is itself to be understood as the prompt for that realisation.

This gnoseological re-reading of devotion permits Acharya Shankara to discipline all loving worship within that inquiry into Brahman that brings about the realisation of non-duality. The worship that he takes to be of greatest value can be framed as a gnostic undertaking. He reads the fifteenth verse of the ninth chapter of the Gita as: 'Others do homage to me by offering the sacrifice of the knowledge of oneness; others worship my diversity; yet others, worship me variously as facing in all directions.' As a contrast, in Laurie Patton's translation of this verse, we have: 'And others, through the sacrifice of wisdom, worship me as the oneness which is multiple, placed in many ways, facing all sides.'<sup>26</sup>

In other words, this can be read quite naturally as a single, cumulative description, whereas Acharya Shankara takes Sri Krishna to be talking of three classes of worshippers. The three classes of worshippers are: those whose sacrificial performance is the attainment of the knowledge

that 'brahman is one'; those whose worship takes the form, 'Lord Vishnu alone abides in all the distinct forms, like the Sun, the Moon, and the like'; and those who worship in many ways, thinking, 'Lord Vishnu alone resides variously in his omni-directional cosmic form'.<sup>27</sup> So, the most exalted form of worship is one in which it is taken that Brahman is one; in the next level down, it is taken that Vishnu abides in all; and finally, that is, at the most accessible and the least spiritually valuable level, there is the belief that Vishnu abides in many forms. While preserving a form of monotheism, Acharya Shankara hierarchises the forms of worship according to their cognitive sophistication, as he sees it.

Another striking example of his view that worshipful action directed at Sri Krishna should only be taken to lead to insight into non-duality comes in his commentary on the twelfth verse of the twelfth chapter of the Gita. There, Sri Krishna says that intellectual gnosis is superior to permanent exercise; sustained reflection surpasses gnosis; renunciation of the fruit of action is better than reflection; and from such renunciation comes peace. The verse's apparent assertion of the renunciation of the fruit of action as the culminating form of the spiritual life, superior, as it were, to gnosis, should be understood as the most powerful path, in the sense that it is the one that is to be followed by those who are not able to do anything else. The power of the path does not lie in its spiritual exaltation, but rather in its being the most accessible and easily enabling. In the preceding verses, Sri Krishna talks of those who fix their mind on him alone; advises those who cannot do that to practise repeatedly fixing their mind on a single object; if they are unable to do that, then to strive for him through disciplined action; and finally, if they are unable even to discipline their action, then to at least renounce the fruit of their action.<sup>28</sup>

In the exegesis relevant for our present purpose, Acharya Shankara maintains that intellectual gnosis accompanied by reflection surpasses gnosis alone. In the commentary, he argues that the disciplinary practice 'characterised by focusing thought on the cosmic form of God' and the performance of actions with God as objective are premised on 'a difference between self and God'. So the discipline of action is the result of ignorance and its practitioner is incapable of seeing non-difference. The discipline of action is unsuitable for the one who meditates on the imperishable.<sup>29</sup>

So, when Sri Krishna says, 'I am their saviour', he is talking of those who are dependent on God.<sup>30</sup> Those who have become Godself should be considered as having the form of the imperishable, since they would have seen the non-difference between God and self. In that case, it would not be sensible to talk of their being objects of the saving act of God.<sup>31</sup> In this superbly imaginative passage, Acharya Shankara demonstrates that a rigorous and uncompromising form of mystical ontologism or unitive mysticism is central to his theology. He neither rejects theological value in the spiritual life nor expounds a theology of salvific grace that sits within an unquestioned onto-theological framework. Acharya Shankara's Sri Krishna is the God through—and, given ultimate non-duality, with—whom Atman or Brahman-realisation is sought.

This brings us to the other role that Acharya Shankara discerns for a theology of Sri Krishna, namely, the attainment of non-duality rendered possible (only?) through Sri Krishna's universal selfhood. Sri Krishna's grace is attained through gnostic realisation and is expressed non-dualistically. Sri Krishna promises *yogakshema*, attainment and preservation, to those who worship him while 'thinking of none else but me'.<sup>32</sup> Acharya Shankara interprets *yogakshema*



as two interrelated things: 'Yoga is attaining the unattained, and *kshema* is the protection of it.'<sup>33</sup> The attainment, of course, is non-duality, since 'thinking of none else but me' means, for Acharya Shankara: '*Aprithagbhutah param devam narayanam atmatvena gatah santah*; becoming non-separate, having realised the supreme deity, Narayana, as the very self.' Acharya Shankara by no means denies the role of worship and divine grace, albeit within a gnostic teleology. We also see now how these two things, while in apparent tension with each other, actually fit together: the gnosis is that confluence of consciousness—guarded and guaranteed by Sri Krishna for the worshipper—which is the realisation of non-duality.

The connection between examination of the self and the exploration of being is, of course, an integral part of Christian theology's assimilation of Greek philosophy; in fact, it is one of the dominant characteristics of onto-theology, onto-theology understood, not necessarily in the way Heidegger did in order to establish his own self-proclaimed originality, but plainly as the conception of an intimate connection between God and being, of at least an understanding of being in and through God, although not necessarily taking Being to name God. Francis S Fiorenza and Gordon D Kaufman point out:

The idea of God as Spirit, pure Being without material parts, led classical Christian authors to approach the understanding of God largely through reflection on the self. In his *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine holds that human intelligence is the highest and best of human attributes. This intelligence is dependent upon a reality that is higher than itself, the spiritual, eternal and unchanging God (2:37–15:39). The soul's knowledge of itself leads to knowledge of God, and to a true idea of being.<sup>34</sup>

Understood in this way, later Christian developments appear to point to a deepening of this

methodology. In Thomas Aquinas, it seems plausible to think that there is a worked out doctrine of *theosis*, a mystical union that is the final goal of the human being.<sup>35</sup> As Williams says, for Aquinas the love that brings about union with God is meditation on God's nature, a theological activity that is sharing in God's being. Of course, this union is between the human and God through God's self-giving, a theme much more appropriately comparable to Acharya Ramanuja's vision of God's love, although he permits inquiry into being as no more than preparation for a loving relationship with God. Two things strike us here in relation to what we have been learning about Acharya Shankara. One is the idea that loving devotion, *bhakti* is noetic, the thinking of God by the worshipper, and therefore directed towards gnosis on the worshipper's part; the other is that such a relationship is possible because of the mapping of self and God through being.

Even while pointing out the centrality of this *theosis* to Thomism, Hemming has argued that, for a Heideggerian, there might well be a problem with the enquiry into the being of oneself becoming the inquiry into God's being. Such an attempt is metaphysical, for it 'makes the being of God the ground of the being of being human'. If so, this 'displaces the ground of the being of being human from the very self that I am, whose being I can then enquire into, onto a being whose being is not transparently interrogable for me, namely God'.<sup>36</sup>

The response to this, although perhaps not by a Thomist, has to be, I think, that the success of the inquiry lies, not in the attainment of a metaphysical grasp of God's being but in God's self-giving. However, we have a very different situation with Acharya Shankara. It is not so much that Acharya Shankara rules out Sri Krishna's grace as playing a role in realisation. The Gita's communications of Sri Krishna's

declarations of gracious giving are too many for that line of interpretation to be sustainable. And it is certainly the case that our love of Sri Krishna is, at any rate, noetic for Acharya Shankara; we have seen that often enough. What is important is that Acharya Shankara is not talking of a union of God's being and the self, but the non-duality of the two.

The inquiry, in Advaita, is already rendered possible only because there is no ontological difference between God and self, 'ontological' both in the standard sense of constitutive nature and in the Heideggerian sense of having the nature to comprehend, reflexively and recursively, one's own being. It is precisely gnosis, turning the attention of consciousness to illuminate consciousness itself, that is rendered possible by the fact that the conscious self is also the self that is God. God's selfhood is the self of all being, and that is why, at one and the same time, immediately and without transition, to attain God and to attain gnosis of true selfhood is also to (re-) attain non-duality.

In the middle of the famous commentary concerning Sri Krishna's culminating promise of salvation, which occupies us in the Gita's last chapter, Acharya Shankara states that freedom from entanglement with the less than real world of action comes to those 'who have taken refuge in the oneness of the Lord's quiddity and the self'.<sup>37</sup> This, then, is Acharya Shankara's theology of Sri Krishna, and his account of its role within gnoseology. But it has always to be remembered that theology does not exhaust Acharya Shankara's system; there is Brahman. The Atman seeks to realise its non-duality with Brahman, not just with God; but the person prays to God and God is Atman, is Brahman. The gnoseological search, *jijnasa*, is not for God even with a theology, but for Brahman. This combination, of course, has no Christian parallel.

### **Self, God, and Brahman: Acharya Shankara, Theology, and Non-dualist Metaphysics**

In contrast to his commentaries on the Upanishads and on the *Brahma Sutra*, which latter, after all, presents itself as concise *aides memoire* to the teachings of the former, the Gita offers Acharya Shankara the unique challenge of interpreting the presence of a robustly immanent, densely subjective, and clearly self-declarative being, Sri Krishna, whose declarations advert to his supreme divinity. This is because, by contrast, the other texts on which he comments locate Brahman as the nodal point of all explanation, and permit him to develop his broad theme of the non-duality of conscious presence condensed in the individuated self and the singular, permeating, and originary principle that is Brahman.

Since Brahman clearly occupies a significant position in the Gita, it is not as if Acharya Shankara is unable to extend his non-dualist conceptual vocabulary to it, but he has to do so *via* Sri Krishna. My argument is that Acharya Shankara should not be seen as trying to explain away Sri Krishna within the working out of the significance of Atman-Brahman. We have an account that is distinctive of Acharya Shankara, and that too, the Acharya Shankara of the Gita commentary: a highly intellectual reading of devotion that nonetheless wholeheartedly endorses devotion to Sri Krishna; a sophisticated and balanced account of the nature of Sri Krishna as both the subject who is supremely being and as being itself which founds all beings; and circumscribing this theology, an overarching understanding of Brahman as the ground or fount of being and non-being, that which ontologically permits beings and the ultimately non-being world to be what they are or are not.

We have, therefore, two radical steps in Acharya Shankara's reading of the Gita. The first

is the non-duality of divine and human being through Sri Krishna's proclamation of his universal selfhood; and the second is the location of this non-duality within the overarching non-duality of Brahman and being or non-being, which is not, as it were, spoken of but ineluctably reached through inquiry into the conditions for the possibility of gnosis. Let us look at these in turn.

### ***Self and God: Acharya Shankara's Mapping and Sri Krishna's Declaration***

Since the Gita often has Sri Krishna say that he is the self of all beings, Acharya Shankara interprets all the other statements of the relationship between God and human beings through this essential declaration. As we have seen, worship is understood as an epistemic quest, the attainment of knowledge of non-duality through systematic thinking of the nature of God, prompted here by Sri Krishna's own assurance of that nature. It is also teleologically gnostic; such understanding is meant to dissolve the phenomenology of existence, from the variegated experiences of the individuated and agonistic person into the consciousness of pure presence that is the truth of selfhood. But it is not just the ontological truth of the non-duality of Sri Krishna and selves that prompts worship and permits gnosis, for it is Sri Krishna's grace that renders worship successful. Let us look again at the first half of the circle, which is Acharya Shankara's mapping of divine and human selfhood, before we turn to the other half, namely, Sri Krishna's assurance that the mapping has salvific potency.

Sri Krishna says: 'He sees truly who sees the supreme God abiding alike in all beings, not dying even as they die.'<sup>38</sup> Acharya Shankara glosses *parameshvara* as the supreme God with regard to *apekshya*, body, senses, mind, intellect, the unmanifest, *avyakta*, and the self, who undyingly abides equally in all beings. This shows, he

asserts, the absolute difference between beings and the supreme God. How so? The change in the state of being described as 'birth' is the root of all other modifications; and all changes in states of being end in death. Beyond death there is no change. By saying that this final change in the state of being is absent in the supreme God, all modification is denied of such God. 'Therefore, it is established that the supreme God is completely other to all beings, is without particularity, is One.'<sup>39</sup>

One who sees the supreme God thus, truly sees. This is contrasted with those who see contrarily. Just as when, compared to those with the eye-defect called *timira* who see many moons, the one who sees the single moon correctly is said to 'see truly', so too, 'the one who sees the one undivided self as described is distinguished from those who contrarily see many selves divided, by saying, "he alone sees".'<sup>40</sup>

This is another of those tightly crafted passages of Acharya Shankara, where what appears to be a conventional point about God's otherness, signified by eternality, is quickly reconfigured in terms of non-dual, not-other selfhood. If God is simple, without particularity, free of modifications to the conditions of being, and therefore free of temporality, then obviously the world and worldly beings are other than God. God's otherness is from the states of all beings, their changefulness that ends in the destruction of their particularity. But this otherful God is also not other, abiding alike in all beings. What is common to all beings is their being, which is Sri Krishna's presence in and as self in them. As the one self that is the self of all being, God is to be distinguished from the manyness of beings, but is not different from their oneness.

Such an interpretation permits Acharya Shankara to read Sri Krishna as himself guaranteeing the culmination of non-dual gnosis in Brahman,

for Sri Krishna affirms: 'When one sees the diversity of states of being abiding in the one, and their expanding from that alone, one attains Brahman.'<sup>41</sup> Acharya Shankara underlines this affirmation by echoing the Upanishadic teaching of non-dual Brahman. 'One attains Brahman' simply means 'one becomes Brahman itself', and one does so when one sees that the self is breath, hope, memory, space, light, water, manifestation and de-manifestation, and food.<sup>42</sup> So, for Acharya Shankara, God is self, and self is Brahman.

Acharya Shankara is aware that this non-dualism makes for a curious theodicy, and attempts to provide an answer. Our concern is not really about the effectiveness of this theodicy but the commitment to non-duality evident in it. Sri Krishna asserts: 'The immutable supreme Self, although in the body, does not act and is not stained.'<sup>43</sup> The mention of 'stain' leads to an objection, as posited by Acharya Shankara: 'Who acts in the body and is stained or affected negatively? If it is another than the supreme Self, who, as the embodied one, acts and is stained, then what becomes of the statement, "Know me as the knower of the field" (13.2), which shows the oneness of the knower of the field and God? However, if there is no other embodied being than God, then who acts and is stained [for it could then not be God]? Or is it that there is no supreme One?'<sup>44</sup>

In a few swift steps, Acharya Shankara sums up the problem. That something is stained, through moral and existential failures, evil and suffering, is undeniable, and it is the body that is so identified. Sri Krishna contrasts this with the supreme Self that is not stained thus. A theodicy concerning a God, who is completely other to worldly being, would seek to answer how such a God permitted the stain. For Acharya Shankara, the problem is strikingly different, as can be seen in his honest presentation of it. His answer

involves a fundamental Advaitic claim about beings in their limited being.

Acharya Shankara responds to the objection by saying that Sri Krishna himself has already pointed out that what 'sets out' or acts is essential nature;<sup>45</sup> and, Acharya Shankara says, that essential nature—the essential nature of beings in the world, who are stained—is ignorance. As we see in his account of the self in human being, ignorance is the taking of oneself to be an individuated being among other beings, the world as ultimately existent, and God as utterly other. Worldly transaction is possible only because the human being's essential nature is just ignorance; it is this clouded sense of separate beingness within a body that generates action, thereby constructing an individuated entity that becomes stained. The supreme Self, that is to say, the Self as the essential presence of Sri Krishna, being itself rather than particular being, is not ultimately the acting, stained entity. So, it is by inscribing all empirical reality to this primal ignorance of being as such that Acharya Shankara offers a non-dualist theodicy for Godself.

The non-duality of God and self is only one half of what Acharya Shankara says about Sri Krishna; the other half, which completes his theology, is that the attainment of non-duality is guaranteed by God's grace. Sri Krishna promises: 'Those who adore me with devotion, they are in me and I in them' (9.29). Acharya Shankara makes clear the relationship involved here. He understands Sri Krishna to be saying, 'I exist in them not through the constraint of attachment; but by their own-being.'<sup>46</sup> This is the ontological core of the salvific promise. The essential nature or own-being of beings is both characterisable as ignorance and the locus of Sri Krishna's presence. Where we are most chained to the world, there Sri Krishna is, in us, but more significantly, as us, so that we may be free.

As we have seen before, it is striking that Acharya Shankara neither concedes that our telos is anything but gnostic non-duality nor asserts that Sri Krishna's grace alone takes us to our self-realisation. An Advaitic reading of the Gita requires Brahman to be the final explanation, but Sri Krishna is required to provide it. Sri Krishna declares himself, whereas Brahman is anonymous to the world of revelation. Sri Krishna, as paradigmatic self that en-selves being, offers the right balance to human inquiry, for in the Gita according to Acharya Shankara, the gnosis that results from inquiry is guaranteed only after it is acknowledged that God has provided the means to inquiry, by a self-declared presence, that prompts, for Acharya Shankara, the only proper devotion, namely, the noetic worship through which gnosis is attained.

But still, it all ends, as it began, with Brahman, or else there would be no Advaita. Acharya Shankara does not shirk from accepting a salvific theology of Sri Krishna; but nevertheless, there is something beyond the theology that circumscribes it and makes his Advaita ultimately an inquiry into reality beyond the theology. In the end, Acharya Shankara is looking for a sort of transmetaphysics, which seeks to get to the ground that renders being possible.

### ***Sri Krishna's Signification of Brahman: The Asymmetric Mystery of Non-duality***

At the heart of Acharya Shankara's Gita is the elusiveness and mystery of the relationship between Sri Krishna and Brahman, for there is no direct equation in the Gita between the two, and none in Acharya Shankara's commentary apart from one intriguing occasion (14.27). Over the course of the commentary, the general impression accumulates of Brahman encompassing but exceeding God. Acharya Shankara points to Brahman as

containing but exceeding being and non-being, the immutable and the mutable (2.16). But Sri Krishna also undeniably characterises himself as immutable; modification characterises beings, while it cannot apply to God (13.28).

Divine immutability, of course, is the cornerstone of most pre-modern theologies. Compare with Augustine, who says: 'When the words of God reach holy Moses through the angel, to his question concerning his name ... the answer was "I am who I am" ... as if, when compared to him who truly is because he is immutable, the things which do change were not; this was vigorously defended and recommended with the greatest possible care by Plato.'<sup>47</sup> Yet Acharya Shankara takes reasonable care to say that Brahman exceeds both the mutable and the immutable, and this despite the fact that he does write loosely and sometimes contradictorily across the length of the commentary.

Acharya Shankara's God is not a philosopher's God, but a theologian's, and yet the theology is subjected to a transmetaphysics of Brahman. Of course, Sri Krishna is not to be dis-identified from Brahman, for Brahman is all, and we have seen how the realisation of Brahman can be approached only through and in Sri Krishna. But non-duality is asymmetric: Brahman cannot be exhausted by non-duality with Sri Krishna or Atman. Acharya Shankara's Sri Krishna speaks of Brahman but indirectly. Sri Krishna points to, rather than identifies with, Brahman: 'When one sees the diversity of states of being abiding in the one, and their expanding from that alone, one attains Brahman.'<sup>48</sup>

Now, if Brahman were to be understood as the free self, distinct from and subordinate to Sri Krishna, as Acharya Ramanuja does, that would be a different matter. But if, as Acharya Shankara does, the Upanishadic non-duality of Atman and Brahman is preserved even while Sri Krishna

is repeatedly identified as the Atman of all, then either Brahman is, symmetrically, Sri Krishna, or exceeds him. Sri Krishna can seem, for Acharya Shankara, to be 'sending', cognitively, as it were, the Atman through him to Brahman, implying the latter option.

But there is one passage in which Acharya Shankara struggles to express the very limits of language in the striving towards Brahman, even when that striving is graced by Sri Krishna. Sri Krishna says: 'I am the support of Brahman, the immortal and imperishable, and of the everlasting dharma, and of absolute joy' (14.27). Acharya Shankara's first step is to point out that the 'I' of Sri Krishna is the inmost self. The implication is that, while the authority of the claim comes from its being spoken by Sri Krishna, it applies as much to each human being as it does to him. This is made clear soon after. Explaining the phrase in the previous verse, 'becomes competent to become Brahman', Acharya Shankara says: 'Since the inmost self is the support of the supreme Self, which is intrinsically eternal, and so on, through complete gnosis, it is ascertained as the supreme Self.'<sup>49</sup>

But the trickier point here is the notion of 'support' or 'the underlying place', 'the base'. This becomes acute when Acharya Shankara then goes on to explain the relationship between God and Brahman, the nearest he gets to it, while stressing non-duality: 'The power of God through which, to bless devotees and so on, the Brahman that is supported, comes forth, I am that power which is Brahman, the power and the possessor of the power not being separate.'<sup>50</sup>


For Acharya Shankara, God's supporting Brahman is not a matter of Brahman having God as its foundation; on the contrary, God supports Brahman as an auxiliary might

support the principal. In similar manner, the inmost self supports, in the sense of expressing in its being, the supreme self. So Acharya Shankara inverts our expectation of the direction in which the asymmetry of 'support' runs. God's being blesses being, and thus the interpersonal relationship at the heart of a theology is secured. But God derives from Brahman, for God supports Brahman in the sense of being the personal bridge to beings. God is the power of Brahman by which being is being and beings have being and are blessed to so realise themselves. But, as the tenet of non-duality affirms, there is no difference between God and Brahman, for there is nothing other than Brahman.

This is a radical circumspection of Godliness, for God is not the ultimate point of Advaitic inquiry; but Acharya Shankara makes the point quickly and circumspectly. He then rounds off the commentary on this verse with another enigmatic interpretive alternative, because he cannot leave the vanishing point of ultimacy so robustly described as this verse does, as immortal, as absolute joy, and the like. He therefore takes Sri Krishna to be saying, 'Or the reference of the word "Brahman" [in this verse] can mean the Brahman that is conceptualised. Of that Brahman, unconceptualised, I myself, and none else, am that which is the support.'<sup>51</sup>

Even the Brahman described as immortal, of everlasting order and absolute joy, while reaching the limits of language, remains within those limits, so the role of Sri Krishna in being the support for our attainment of such a Brahman seems somehow to be limited too. If God is the power through which we realise our supreme Self, it is that Self that is none other than Brahman that must escape our language. God should take us beyond language, bound as language is to the forms of our current being. So, Acharya

Shankara takes Sri Krishna to be saying that what can be said of Brahman as we conceptualise it, in our language and our imagination. But that which God supports for our realisation is Brahman beyond understanding, beyond language, beyond concepts. The gnosis by which the inmost Self is realised as the supreme Self, who is God, is also more than just the realisation of reality at maximal understanding, for that takes us only to the conceptualised Brahman. God, and God alone, takes us beyond our understanding, beyond our becoming, to Brahman—that which we feebly call the unconceptualised Brahman.

The great mystery of the God of Advaita's inquiry into Brahman still remains, although we have tried to draw out what we can from Acharya Shankara's ingenious, often breathtakingly unconventional, and to this day, hardly understood and much misinterpreted, reading of the nature of Sri Krishna in the Gita. We have to make what we will of the interpretive conundrum in Acharya Shankara's description of Sri Krishna as the signifier of Brahman, in the introduction to his commentary on the Gita: 'This sacred text, the Gita, while particularly revealing the ... ritual cosmic order having the highest good as its purpose and the supreme reality called Vasudeva, being that signifies Brahman in excess, as its subject matter, is shown to have a special purpose and connection.'<sup>52</sup> 

### Notes and References

1. This essay has been extracted from Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, *Divine Self, Human Self: The Philosophy of Being in Two Gita Commentaries* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).
2. Gita, 3.22.
3. Exodus 3:14.
4. For a study of the exemplary Christian use of *via eminentiae* in Thomas Aquinas, see Leo J Elders, SVD, *The Philosophical Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Brill: Leiden, 1990), Chapter 6; 174–185.
5. Gita, 7.18.
6. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the Gita, 7.18: '*Abameva bhagavan vasudevah na anyo'smi*.'
7. Gita, 7.19.
8. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the Gita, 7.19: '*Sarvatmanam mam pratipadyate*.'
9. Gita, 10.20.
10. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the Gita, 7.20: '*Prapadyante'nya-devatah prapnuvanti vasudevad-atmano'nya devatah*.'
11. Acharya Shankara is more concerned with the ontology of other deities elsewhere, primarily in his commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*. For an insightful analysis of the mediatory role of such entities, invoking too striking a comparison with angels in Aquinas, see Francis X Clooney, SJ, 'Śaṅkara's Theological Realism: The Meaning and Usefulness of Gods (devatā) in the Uttara Mīmāṃsā Sūtra Bhāṣya', *New Perspectives on Advaita Vedanta: Essays in Commemoration of Professor Richard De Smet, SJ*, ed. Bradley J Malkovsky (Leiden, Brill, 2000), 30–50.
12. Gita, 7.24.
13. Acharya Shankara's introduction to his commentary on the Gita: '*Imam dviprakaram dharmam nihsreyasaprayojanam, paramarthatattvam cha vasudevakhyam param brahmabhidheyabbutam visheshatah abhivyanjayat*.'
14. Gita, 10.8.
15. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the Gita, 10.8: '*Aham param brahma Vasudeva-akhyam*.'
16. Compare with Meister Eckhart, who says: 'The word "I" is proper to none, but to God in His oneness' (*The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. Maurice O'C Walshe (New York: Herder and Herder, Crossroad, 2009), Sermon Seventeen; 132.
17. Generally, and correctly, prakriti is translated as 'material nature', especially in the Sankhya school whose early ideas heavily influence the Gita, but at 7.5, the Gita itself, quite apart from Acharya Shankara, talks of the higher prakriti being of individual beings, who bear up the world; therefore, prakriti is not materiality alone but all limitation.
18. See Gita, 7.4–5.
19. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the Gita, 10.5: '*Itah asyah yathoktayah tu anyam vishuddham prakritim mama atmabbutam viddhi*.'
20. See Gita, 7.6.



21. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the Gita, 7.14: '*Tatra evam sati sarvadharmā parityajya mameva mayavinam svatmābhitam sarvatmanā ye prapadyante.*'
22. See Gita, 18.66.
23. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the Gita, 2.39: '*Tat-prapty-upaye nihśāngataya dvandva-prahana-purvākam īśvara-aradhana-arthe karmayoge karma-anuśthāne samādhiyoge cha.*'
24. Gita, 8.22.
25. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the Gita, 8.22: '*Purī śhayanat purnatvadva.*'
26. *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Laurie L Patton (London: Penguin, 2014), 9.15; 105.
27. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the Gita, 9.15: '*Kechichcha prithaktvena, adityachandra-dibhedena sa eva bhagavan vishnuh avasthitah iti upasate. Kechit bahudha avasthitah sa eva bhagavan sarvatomukhabh vishvarupah iti tam vishvarupam sarvatomukham bahudha babu-prakarena upasate.*'
28. See Gita, 12.8–11.
29. Acharya Shankara's introduction to Gita, 12.13: '*Atra cha atmeshvarabhedam-asritya vishvarupe īśvare cheetaḥ-samādhana-lakṣaṇaḥ yogah uktah, īśvarārtham karmanuśthānādi cha.*'
30. Gita, 12.7.
31. Acharya Shankara's introduction to Gita, 12.13: '*Yadi hi īśvarasya atmābhitah te mataḥ abheda-darśhitvat, akṣara-svarupah eva te iti samuddharāna-karma-vachanam tan prati apeśhālam syat.*'
32. Gita, 9.22.
33. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the Gita, 9.22: '*Yogakṣhemam yogah apraptasya prapanam kṣhemam tadraṁkṣhaṇam tadubhayaṁ.*'
34. Francis S Fiorenza and Gordon D Kaufman, 'God', *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C Taylor (Chicago: Chicago University, 1998), 136–59. For the relevant passage of Saint Augustine, see Augustine, *Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993).
35. See A N Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999), 149–61 and Laurence Paul Hemming, 'In Matters of Truth: Heidegger and Aquinas', *Contemplating Aquinas: On the Varieties of Interpretation*, ed. Fergus Kerr, (London: scm, 2003), 85–104.
36. 'In Matters of Truth: Heidegger and Aquinas', 88.
37. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the Gita, 18.66: '*Bhagavat-svarupa-atmaikatva-sharananam.*'
38. Gita, 13.28.
39. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the Gita, 13.28: '*Tasmat sarvābhitah vailakṣhanyam-ātyantameva parameshvarasya siddham nirvisheshatvam-ekatvam cha.*'
40. Ibid.: '*Ekam avibhaktam yathoktam ātmanam yah paśhyati saḥ vibhaktā-aneka-atma-viparīta-darśhibhyah vishishyate saiva paśhyatīti.*'
41. Gita, 13.31.
42. See *Chhāndogya Upanishad*, 7.26.1 and Acharya Shankara's commentary on the Gita, 13.31.
43. Gita, 13.32.
44. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the Gita, 13.32.
45. Gita, 5.14.
46. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the Gita, 9.29: '*Svābhavata eva na mama raganimitam vartante.*'
47. Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, 8.11. I have slightly altered the translation in Jean-Luc Marion, 'Idipsum: The Name of God According to Augustine', *Orthodox Readings of Augustine*, eds George E Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary, 2008); 167–88; 171.
48. Gita, 13.30.
49. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the Gita, 14.27: '*Amrita-adi svābhavasya paramānandarūpasya paramātmānah pratyagātma pratisṭha samyag-jñānena paramātmātaya nischīyate.*'
50. Ibid.: '*Yaya cha īśvara-shaktya bhaktā-anugrahādi prayojanāya brahma pratisṭhate pravartate sa shaktiḥ brahmaivaham shakti shaktimātor-ananyatvat.*'
51. Ibid.: '*Athava brahma śhabda vachyatvat savikalpakam brahma. Tasya brahmano nirvikalpako'ham eva nanyah pratisṭha aśrayah.*'
52. Acharya Shankara's introduction to his commentary on the Gita: '*Imam ... dharma-niḥśhreyasa-prayojanam paramārtha-tattvam cha vāsudevākhyam param brahmābhīdheyābhitam visheshataḥ abhivyanjayat vishishṭa-prayojana-sambandha-abhīdheyatvat gita-shāstram.*'

# ***The Body in Advaita and Phenomenology— Two Non-Dualisms and Three Null-points***

**Drew Leder**

## ***Introduction***

**F**IRST, AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE. Through much of my personal and professional career I have had a foot in two camps. I have been a student and scholar of contemporary Continental European ‘philosophy of the body’, most centrally using the work of French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. On the other side, I have also been a student and college teacher of Advaita Vedanta, which has emphasised disassociating from one’s identification with the embodied self in order to realise a transpersonal union with the Divine.

I am here exploring the relationship of these two ways of thought, each of which has found resonance in my own experience and practices. If one is correct, is the other simply wrong? After all, one emphasises the inescapable nature of embodiment; the other says this is precisely the delusion we must escape. Yet, are there also points of commonality between these two systems? Each deconstructs our ordinary dualistic sense of self and other, of mind and matter. Each offers a non-dualistic revelation, which is phenomenologically accessible—that is, founded on, and available to, our immediate experience.

Finally, or alternatively, is there a way these systems complement each other? Does one address relative truths, another, the absolute; does

one examine ordinary experience, the other extraordinary experiences obtainable through spiritual disciplines?

In short, have we pure opposition; or modes of agreement; or complementarity? If the latter, can we explore more clearly what one system has to contribute to the other?

Needless to say, this is a huge topic, or really set of topics. I narrowed down my question first by focusing on one contemporary representative of Advaita teachings to whom I was drawn, the British author, speaker, and professional potter, Rupert Spira.<sup>1</sup> He tends to define himself as a non-dualist, representing a ‘Consciousness-only’ point of view, but discarding the textual, terminological, and cultural accretions associated with Advaita Vedanta, or indeed any other mystical tradition. Along with his own teacher, Francis Lucille,<sup>2</sup> he is somewhat in the lineage of Ramana Maharshi,<sup>3</sup> employing that what can be referred to as ‘direct path’ teachings. Coming to the point, ‘Who am I?’ is a key question, accessible through a mode of self-inquiry available to us at any moment.

Examining our own experience, we realise we never perceive the external, separate material objects either as defined by science or by our commonsense world view. In actuality, we uncover a field of unbounded Awareness that underlies but transcends the specific contents that appear within it. Along with what Spira terms ‘the inward path’, in which we dis-identify from our

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immersion in the world, he also supports ‘the outward path’ wherein we see the oneness of Self and world revealed as through experiences of love and beauty.

One illustrative analogy Spira uses for the play of Awareness is that of a TV, computer, or movie screen which allows an indefinite range of images to flash across it. The world we experience, including our own body, thoughts, and indeed all of space and time, are such images. Awareness is like the open screen upon which these images appear and disappear. In this metaphor, the screen is also self-aware, capable of viewing itself. To use classical language, which Spira usually doesn’t, one discovers the Atman, the true Self, as one with Brahman, and all of its creations. It is *maya* to perceive a multiplicity of independent objects and subjects, rather than to understand all of this as *lila*, the play of divine Awareness.

Focusing on Spira’s books and workshops helped me bore down to central teachings that engaged me on the Advaita side. On the side of bodily phenomenology, with all its richness, ambiguity and complexity, I narrowed things down as much as possible by focusing on a single point, in fact a null-point. Edmund Husserl, the twentieth-century German philosopher who founded the ‘phenomenological’ approach of examining the structures of lived experience, did groundbreaking work on the living body, seen as radically different from other material objects. For example, he wrote on how the body serves as a *nullpunkt*, a null-point in the perceived world, a notion developed further by Merleau-Ponty. In this paper, I will examine three different ways of understanding the idea of a ‘nullpoint’. These divergent meanings will help clarify what phenomenological and Advaitic non-dualisms have in common, how they differ, and in what ways they might complement and contribute to one another.

### **The Cartesian and Phenomenological Null-point**

In *Ideas II*, Husserl writes: ‘All spatial being necessarily appears in such a way that it appears either nearer or farther, above or below, right or left. ... Body then has, for its particular Ego, the unique distinction of bearing in itself the *zero point* [*nullpunkt*] of all these orientations. One of its spatial points, even if not an actually seen one, is also always characterised in the mode of ultimate central here.’<sup>4</sup> That is, wherever we go, there we are. As we change positions, the life-world rotates around us, what was left is now right, but our body ever remains as the orientational zero point of the sensorimotor field.

As the American phenomenologist Edward Casey writes: ‘Husserl adverts to the geometric idea of the null or zero point in a deliberate if ironic borrowing from Descartes. Just as the zero point in analytic geometry (i.e., the point where the X, Y, and Z axes coincide) is posited as stationary and invariant, so my body as *Nullpunkt* has the peculiar property of seeming always unmoving in relation to the surrounding world.’<sup>5</sup>

We thus have two related but contrasting conceptions of the null-point. That employed in Cartesian geometry relates to the physical world in which everything has measurable extension. Any point in the mathematical world, or the material world it represents, can be chosen as the zero point of orientation. For example, in hanging a painting, I can measure my zero point, perhaps one equidistant between two side walls, make a pencil dot there, and use this to position my artwork. This is a geometric procedure dividing up the material world.

But in hanging that painting, I probably chose to place it at or near eye-level. And thus we are reminded of the lived body, my null-point of orientation for the experienced world. Of course, the eyes with which I see the painting and its

surroundings never themselves appear within the visual field they subtend. This is another meaning present in the metaphor of the null-point. The eyes, so to speak, nullify themselves. Putting aside for a moment mirror phenomena, the eyes are what we see *from*, and thus we cannot see *to* them as objects appearing within my visual field.<sup>6</sup> They are not visible to me, although, because, they are the very origin and structuring principle of my sightline.

Descartes's null-point of analytic geometry is embedded in his dualist metaphysics. Excluding all attributes of consciousness, which belong to *res cogitans*, the physical world is left as sheer *res extensa*, that which can be characterised mathematically.<sup>7</sup> In this world, which later becomes the Newtonian world of absolute space, there is no natural zero point, insofar as any point can equally so serve. Of course, the notion of a 'point' is itself a mathematical abstraction; it has nullity at its heart for it has no physical dimensions.

The phenomenological notion of the embodied null-point is appreciably different. It undoes the dualism of *res extensa* and *res cogitans* insofar as it is a null-point associated with physical position, yet orienting an experiential, not a strictly material, life-world. Subjectivity is corporeal, embedded in what Merleau-Ponty will call the '*corps propre*', or 'lived body'.<sup>8</sup> This body is not simply a physical object in the world, nor a mathematical abstraction. In Casey's words again, this phenomenological null-point represents a 'deliberate if ironic borrowing from Descartes', taken from analytic geometry yet now used in a way that is non-mathematical, non-dualist, and therefore anti-Cartesian.

### **The Null-point in Advaita**

So we now have two different null-points, but turning back to Advaita we discover implicit

reference to a third. Advaita suggests that our primordial Awareness can neither be captured by a strictly physicalist description of the world, nor identified with the lived body. Our body can and does change over time, but Awareness remains throughout all these changes, like that empty screen that underlies all the images that appear and disappear upon it.

Interoceptions and kinesthesias identified with our embodied experience form one part of the contents of consciousness, and are often identified as belonging to 'me'. Other parts of experience—the book over there, the sky glimpsed through a window, we label as 'outside world,' and therefore 'non-self'. But from the Advaitic perspective, all of these objects of consciousness are Self, and in another sense, none are.

Spira doesn't explain this through referencing mystical awakenings, but through a careful examination of simple ordinary experience. In the field of awareness, we see that one's body appears, the book appears, interoceptions appear, the window appears, the sky appears. Who am I? I am *all of it* insofar as I am essentially a field of experience which underlies and shines forth through all these contents. In another sense, I am *none of these things*. After all, the field of Awareness, like a movie screen, is non-identical to any temporary images projected on it, including the interoceptions and positions associated with the lived body. The screen is not one with the movie's protagonist, nor the point-of-view shots taken from that protagonist's perspective. The lived body might be compared to the camera through which the film of an individual's life is shot, but not the transpersonal Consciousness that is ultimately creating and viewing it.

The screen or the viewer will never show up as any image portrayed on the screen. In fact, the play of images tends to make us forget about the blank screen upon which they are projected.

Absorbed in the film, and suspending disbelief, we think we are watching heroes and villains fight, or lovers kiss. All we are really looking at is actually the movie screen, yet paradoxically that screen is what we most lose sight of when caught up in the movie. This is then *another null-point* at the heart of experience, one associated with delusion and maya.

Just as the notion of lived body as null-point drew on, but ironically reversed the Cartesian meaning, here too this Advaitic null-point can be said to draw on, but ironically reverse, the phenomenological form. Phenomenologically, the embodied perceiving ‘eye’ orients but absents itself from the visual field precisely because it is limited, inserted within the material world. We always see from a particular perspective, thereby viewing one side of an object, but not its back-side, what is near in more detail than what is far, what lies in front of us, but not what is behind our back. There is no ‘view from nowhere’. But what of the Advaitic ‘I’? It is an experiential null-point *not because it is a limited body, but precisely because it is unlimited*, beyond all bodies. It is a screen, space, field, Awareness, Consciousness, Brahman, Emptiness—choose your metaphor—which is formless, but thereby can allow all forms to manifest. It is everywhere and nowhere, a null-point that we may also call an all-point, because it permeates all experience.

It is then, in a sense, a ‘view from nowhere’ despite the perceptual limitations of any particular perspective. By a pleasing coincidence, the English word *nowhere* can be alphabetically broken down into *now* and *here*. Our experience always unfolds ‘now’. No one has ever lived a single moment in the past or future, though memory and anticipation may form part of our *now*. Similarly, we always find ourselves *here*. Travelling through China on a whirlwind trip, I became particularly aware of this. Whatever

room, city, region, I awoke in, which was hard to keep track of, I was nonetheless always right *here* each morning as I sat up in bed. In such ways, we ever find ourselves dwelling in the *now-here*; yet, again to Advaita, this *now-here* is also a *no-where*, not simply a point within the Newtonian or Cartesian space-time grid. Rather, this is the eternal, infinite field of Awareness that permits space-time to manifest within it, always presencing as the *now-here*.

Let me clarify this challenging notion further, with specific relation to the *here*. We saw that for Husserl and Merleau-Ponty this is oriented by the lived body as null-point, the ‘here’ around which all perceptual objects near and far, right and left, are arrayed. But for Spira, all that is experienced is equally *near*, in fact *here*, relative to witnessing Consciousness. Again, using a movie metaphor, an actor we see in the foreground of a scene, or a tree pictured in the background, is actually appearing on the same plane of the screen, in truth equidistant from the observer. Seeming near and far are in fact illusions created by the magic of movies. Similarly, as I sit in my room, the feeling of fatigue I am experiencing, the thoughts running through my mind, the nearby phone I see, the houses I notice outside my window, *are all equally here*, that is immediately part of and present to me as experiencer.

But if we are this Awareness, why don’t we simply have a transcendent view from nowhere? As Spira says, for infinite consciousness to enter into experience it has to limit itself, localise itself, dualise itself into self and other.<sup>9</sup> This necessarily involves ignorance—that is, we must ignore, forget, conceal, much of our infinite Being, thereby introducing what would classically be called maya, identification with the limited self. This is the price we pay for the divine lila of experience.

### Commonalities and Differences

So what is the relation between these two philosophies, one phenomenological, the other Advaitic? First, commonalities. Both notions reject our current ruling paradigm of scientific, even eliminative, materialism. Both also are meaningfully non-dualist portraits of the world. They do away with the notion of consciousness and materiality as independent substances, and even undercut any firm dualism of subject and object, self and other, perceiver and perceived. Both engage in a careful examination of experience and both build something of an experientially-based ontology. Merleau-Ponty, in his later unfinished work, moves in this direction through his suggestive notions of the 'flesh of the world' and the circuit of 'Visibility'.<sup>10</sup> Spira, though focusing on realising the 'I am' as our eternal, infinite, Awareness, nonetheless honours how this Awareness opens up an experiential world through using the vehicle of a localised body-mind.

Yet we also see clear points of opposition between these two non-dualisms. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and later ontology, centers on the corporeality of the lived body and flesh. To imagine some transcendent, immaterial consciousness with a 'view from nowhere' is to fall into delusion. Spira and Advaita might say the opposite—identification with the limited body is itself the core delusion that keeps us trapped in ignorance and suffering.

### The Dream Body: A Reconciliation?

Let me introduce a last body that may affect a certain reconciliation between these views. Consider the dream body. This is a traditional image from Advaita and Buddhist teachings that Spira utilises repeatedly as metaphor. Say, you have fallen asleep. You dream you are on a boat travelling through India, strangely enough, a dream I recently had. Other people board, or leave, when

the boat docked. I step onto solid land and get on a train, which I then discover is going in the wrong direction, and so the dream proceeds with all the anxious vividness of life.

Upon awakening I realised that the entirety of the dream, all the people and events within it, were the product of my one dreaming consciousness. I produced 'myself', the dream-Drew, but also the others sitting near me, and the boat, and the Indian setting. It was all equally the creation of my mind. And yet there was one part of the scene with which I particularly identified—the dream figure I felt myself to be me. I seemed to be that person, occupy that specific seat on the boat, and to witness everything from that perspective. Hence this dream body served as a null-point around which the dream-space was oriented.

But on awakening I realised that there had been another experiential null-point, hitherto concealed—that is, myself, the actual dreamer who was fast asleep in my bed the whole time. This was the true origin of the dream world, but was nowhere to be found within the dream world either as an object or subject. From the Advaitic view this is a metaphor for our true state. We remain stuck in the dream of maya until we awaken to discover this world as the product of a Atman or Brahman, or to use another phrase, the mind of God.

We thus might arrive at a 'two truths' perspective, which accepts a relative and an absolute description of experience, both of which have value. Within the world of multiplicity, the phenomenological account of lived embodiment would hold. Husserl and Merleau-Ponty help clarify the many ways in which the *corps propre*, my own body, is differentiated from other objects. Moreover, in recognising that we live in an experienced world, and one in which subjects and objects, selves and others, are not isolated things, but intimately intertwining in

a perceptual, motoric, and emotional bond, this non-dualistic world picture verges on what might be called the spiritual.

From the point of view of Advaita, bodily phenomenology would be something of a mid-way point towards awakening. It is an advance on materialism in that it recognises the experiential nature of the life-world and the bonded nature of subject-object in the perceptual relation, and ultimately the 'flesh of the world'. Nonetheless there is a way in which a further awakening step is needed, wherein one understands this lived body as something like a *dream-body*, not the ultimate source and locus of consciousness. When we trace back the 'I am' experience, for example using Ramana Maharshi's method of self-inquiry, we arrive at the Atman, the divine Consciousness that is the ultimate source of any and all localised modes of awareness.

As a closing metaphor for the three null-points we have surveyed, imagine a physical eye. From the Cartesian point of view, we could look at it as material object and choose its physical centre as the zero point of orientation. Something like this happens when an eye doctor aligns the ophthalmoscope precisely for retinal examination. But switching to the perspective of the one whose eye it is, the point of view becomes the phenomenological null-point at the heart of his visual field; gazing around the exam room, one's eyes orient one to what is to the right or left, above or below. And yet what if this is something like a dream-body, not ultimately real as separate entity? From the Advaitic point of view, there is a third null-point, the absent or present transcendental gaze that creates, and subtends the entire dream of human existence. One might imagine the eye of God, looking out through the eye of the patient, and the eye of the doctor, and all the eyes, I's, of the world, upon a world that is also made of God. This God or Atman or

Awareness, is the null-point that is everywhere and nowhere.

### ***How Can Phenomenology Contribute to Advaita?***

A last question arises: if one takes the Advaitic perspective on the world, must we dismiss the phenomenology of the body as yet another relative, and somewhat delusive, account, or does it have something valuable to contribute to Advaitic understanding and practice? I would argue for the latter position.

I believe many Advaitic teachers, in their zeal to help students dis-identify with the limited body, which must grow old and die, end up minimising or even mischaracterising, our experiential relation to our body. The body is sometimes compared to other material objects. For example, my body is a certain measureable age, size, and weight like any other physical entity, yet I don't feel my conscious awareness as limited and measureable in the same way. This is true, but still characterises the body as if it were simply an external object. Our experience tells us otherwise—for example, we have an interoceptive awareness of our corporeal inside, as we don't for outer objects like tables and chairs.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, many Advaita teachers, including Spira, also focus on such interoceptive experiences as core to our identification with our bodies. These experiences—the tinglings, the pains, the heaviness, the flutterings—can also be thematised as simply transitory objects in our perceptual field. It is pointed out that I identify certain experiences, say, the rumblings in my stomach, as part of 'me' and call other experiences, say, a birdsong I hear, as 'other than me'. This division, though, is artificial. All of these, rumblings, songs, are equally objects of experience appearing to the Subject. The mistake comes, it is said, when the subject, really, the



unlimited Subject, identifies with any object in its field, creating the self-other dichotomy and the experience of limitation and mortality.

Yet, those exploring Advaitic teachings may still feel less than fully convinced by this account, and the injunction is frequently given to 'not accept any teachings until you have validated them through your own experience'. For the lived body is not just like any other material object, nor is it simply a set of interoceptive sensations that appear as objects in the experiential field. As outlined earlier, phenomenology reveals that the body is also very much the 'subject' of its life-world. As a null-point of orientation, the body places me within an organised life-world.

For example, my eyes reveal an array of objects with colour, form, solidity, and personal meaning, all arrayed within a rich environment—for example, the office in which I am now working. This totality refers back to what Husserl and Merleau-Ponty call the 'I can' structure of my practical abilities.<sup>12</sup> I am writing this article using fingers on a keyboard, fingers that have learned the placement of keys so well that I have no need to think about their location. You, who are reading the article are using your eyes, relying on their effortless grasp of marks on page or screen. Human activity, including the realms of the intellectual, practical, desiring, expressive, and on and on, are all structured by our embodied powers.

I would suggest then that Advaita teaching would do better to incorporate, rather than ignore or deny, the rich account of embodiment offered by phenomenology. Otherwise, Advaitic teachings that 'you are not your body' may remain unconvincing or misleading. In everyday life, the lived body is *subject* as well as *object*, that which filters, guides, and structures our experience of the world.

Here I think Spira has valuable teachings to offer. At times, he does identify the body simply

with its series of interoceptive sensations, objects of the experiential field. But at other times he acknowledges the role of the lived body or often he speaks of the 'body-mind', in the subject position. Here, for example, is a transcription of Spira speaking at a retreat: 'Although you have understood that consciousness is not limited *to* your body, it does perceive *through* your body and therefore you feel, quite rightly so, that your body is full of consciousness. But just because this room is full of space doesn't mean that the space is limited to or generated by the room. ... that doesn't mean that the consciousness that your body is full of is limited to your body or generated by it. ... if awareness goes to its own experience of itself it finds no limitations there.'<sup>13</sup>

Herein, a phenomenological sense of the lived body doesn't entail rejecting the Advaitic position, or vice versa. As Spira says, the 'body is full of consciousness'; it is not just a material object like a table or chair. It is something we *perceive through, not simply an object of perception*. The Advaitic perspective can account for this without abandoning its sense of a transpersonal Awareness. This Awareness is expressed through localised bodies, but ultimately both incorporates and transcends all limited perspectives. As Spira says, a room limits and structures space, and yet infinite space is unconfined by this temporary encasing. It is there before, during, and after; in fact, the sense of limitation is never ultimately real, as space ever stretches beyond boundaries. So, too, may an infinite Awareness choose to experience itself through the vehicle of embodied, perspectival consciousness; this doesn't prove that the body is either the source or limitation of Consciousness.

### ***Practical and Metaphysical Implications***

If it were to take the phenomenology of the lived body seriously, are there then, any


practice-oriented, even metaphysical, implications for Advaita? I would say yes and yes. On the level of practice, Spira provides a suggestive example. While honouring the Advaitic separation between the 'I am' and the limited objects of the world, he also honours an ensuing movement back towards the world—the discovery that the One shines radiantly through its multiplicity of subjects and objects. He calls this the 'tantric' or 'outward path'. Realising the power of our identification with the body, and the need to loosen it up, he uses a series of what he terms 'yoga meditations' with names like 'permeating the body with luminous awareness', 'the sacred essence of the body', 'the world is your body', and 'dissolving the body in God's dimensionless being'. For example, in one meditation the practitioner is invited to breathe into a space in front of and behind the body, allowing the feeling of one's embodiment to expand and dissolve into a healing, luminous, loving space.<sup>14</sup> Spira says that it is not enough to cognitively *know* the truths of Advaita; one also has to begin to *feel* them experientially, which includes dissolving the sense that we are a limited, constricted body.

This is not necessarily counter to phenomenological perspectives. Therein, the lived body is understood as naturally 'ecstatic', from the Greek root *ek-stasis*, meaning to 'stand outside'. The lived body, through its powers of perception, motility and desire, is always leaping beyond itself to perceive and act upon an external world.<sup>15</sup> Yet, phenomenology does not focus on liberatory practices in the way of Hinduism and Buddhism. The yoga meditation presented above is but one example of how one might explore and extend this ecstatic nature of embodiment. Spira believes this is an intermediary step on the way to experiencing the infinite unbounded Awareness that shines through the body-mind, like an eye looking through a keyhole.

Bringing Advaita and phenomenology into dialogue yields not only practice-oriented implications, but also metaphysical suggestions. Let us hypothesise that there is a unitary Awareness, Atman-Brahman, that underlies the multiplicity, *maya*, of the world. Yet, let us also hypothesise that in order for this unitary Awareness to have experience, it needs to divide itself up and enter into a kind of delusive play, *maya-lila*, that enables it to encounter itself through the subject-object dichotomy. As a *subject*, it sees the world from a particular limited perspective. This is correlated with its appearance as a seemingly limited *object* in the world. I see you using my physical eyes, but my eyes are also, therefore, material objects you can see. Advaita honours the non-dual Awareness that lies behind all manifestation. Phenomenology honours the non-dual subject or object relationships that ground the world of perception and action. Can you put them together and arrive at a metaphysics that honours the full range of experience, both relative and absolute?

I find myself thinking of two systems, one Western, one Eastern, and will close with but a suggestive mention of each. The Western one is the 'process philosophy' of Alfred North Whitehead.<sup>16</sup> This famous twentieth-century mathematician and philosopher constructed a speculative cosmology that tried to take into account the full range of human experience as well as the findings of science, even the relativistic and quantum mechanical theories recently developed when he was writing in the 1920s. For Whitehead, every entity, really every atom of space-time, is both a subject taking in, prehending, all influences from the world around it, and on the way to becoming an object for the prehension of the rest of the universe. Thus, a kind of consciousness is present in all being, including that which we ordinarily consider inanimate, down to the subatomic level.

Some sense of all beings as both subject and object, is present as well in Hua-yen Buddhism. This school of thought and practice is perhaps best-known for its use of the image of Indra's Net.<sup>17</sup> This net has, at each of its infinite number of interstices, a jewel which in turn reflects all the other jewels of the net, ad infinitum. Look into any one jewel and you perceive the entirety of the universe, all the other jewels, albeit reflected from its own particular perspective. Thus the One is not other than the Many reflecting upon itself, experiencing itself, from an indefinite multiplicity of vantage points. As humans, our jewel-like nature is found in the lived body, that subject through which we experience the world, while also appearing within it as an object for others.

Are such notions still identifiable as Advaitic? Maybe not in a classical sense—after all, here I am taking as a reference point an East Asian form of Buddhism. Yet the image of Indra's Net originally derives from the Atharva Veda.<sup>18</sup> I think it can be employed in a phenomenologically-enriched Advaita. The play, lila, of the divine Awareness, Atman-Brahman, takes the embodied form that phenomenology insightfully describes. Our lived body is not simply an object to be dis-identified with, but also the precious vehicle through which the Self perceives itself, that is, a jewel in Indra's Net. 

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# Management Lessons from Advaita

Bhaves A Kinkhabwala

## Introduction

THE WORD 'ADVAITA' is very beautiful. It literally means 'non-dual'. Dvaita means 'dual' and the prefix 'a' negates the existence of duality so, there is no 'two' but, 'one'. It could be simpler, if we said 'one', but then, the next question would be, is there 'two'; so by saying non-dual, it conveys the clear and firm message of being just one, that is non-dual.

Acharya Shankara's 'philosophical standpoint can be tried to be summed up in a single word "Advaita"—NonDuality. The objective of Advaita is to make an individual understand his or her fundamental (profound) character with the preeminent reality [sic] "Nirakar Brahman" and reality that there is no "two" yet one and only. Advaita shows us to see the substance of oneself in each one and that nobody is separate from the Supreme Power The GOD.<sup>1</sup>

What essentialness does it have for the regular daily life of an ordinary person? Advaita instructs us to see the essence of oneself in each one and that nobody is independent from the supreme power or authority, God, Nature, the Divine power. The teachings and lessons of Acharya Shankara can be summed up in a refrain: '*Brahma satyam jagan mithya jivo brahmaiva na aparah*'; Brahman, the Absolute, is alone real; this world is unreal; and the jiva or the individual soul is non-different from Brahman.<sup>2</sup> This is the core of his way of thinking. The Advaita educated by

Acharya Shankara is a thorough, outright one. As indicated by him, whatever is, is Brahman. Brahman itself is totally homogeneous. All distinctions and plurality are deceptive.<sup>3</sup>

Dualism, Dvaita; qualified monism, Vishishtadvaita; and Monism, Advaita; are the three different fundamental schools of metaphysical ideas. They are altogether different stages to the final stage of the ultimate Truth, namely, *para-brahma*. They are the steps on the stepping stool of yoga. They are not in any manner conflicting but, in actuality, they are complementary to one another. These stages are amicably orchestrated in an evaluated arrangement of spiritual experiences. Dualism, qualified monism, pure monism—all these come full circle inevitably in the Advaita Vedantic acknowledgement of the Absolute or the supra-normal *trigunatita ananta* Brahman.

Individuals have various personalities and various limits. Thus, various schools of theory are additionally fundamental. The most elevated step is Advaita theory. A dualist or qualified monist in the long run turns into a *kevala-advaitin*. A Dvaitin needs to serve the Lord as a worker. The Dvaitin wishes to attend and serve the Lord. A Visishtadvaitin needs to end up like Lord Narayana and appreciate the heavenly. One doesn't wish to combine oneself or become indistinguishable with the Lord. One wishes to stay as a flash. A *jnani* blends oneself in Brahman. One wishes to end up indistinguishable with Brahman.

The primary orderly proponent of the Advaita was Acharya Gaudapada, who is the grand guru

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of Acharya Shankara. Acharya Govindapada was the disciple of Acharya Gaudapada. He was the guru of Acharya Shankara. Acharya Gaudapada has given the focal teaching of Advaita Vedanta in his *Mandukya Karika*. Be that as it may, it was Acharya Shankara who delivered the final delightful form or version of Advaita theory and gave a rightness and completing tone to it. Cautiously studying Acharya Shankara's commentaries on the important Upanishads, the *Brahma Sutra*, and the Bhagavadgita, one will obviously comprehend his Advaita reasoning.<sup>4</sup>

Maybe the most significant school of Indian spiritual way of thinking, Advaita is viewed as the most powerful and most overwhelming sub-school of Vedanta, one of the six standard schools of Hindu way of thinking. Advaita Vedanta says that the one constant Reality, Brahman, alone exists and that changing elements don't have absolute presence, much as the sea's waves have no separate presence in division from the sea. The waves ascend inside the sea and there would be no waves without the sea. In a similar way, the transient world ascends inside the Reality and owes its reality to the ultimate Reality.<sup>5</sup>

The world has no autonomous presence from Reality and that is the reason why it is said to be an illusion. What is changing must be dependent on something else and thereby unreal. This wonderful universe of names and structures is consistently evolving. Names and structures are liable to rot and demise. Subsequently, they are incredible or ephemeral. What is consistent or changeless should dependably be the Real. The Atman or the Eternal, all-pervading Self, ever exists. It permeates all items like ether. Regardless of whether the pot is broken, the ether that is inside and outside it can't be decimated.<sup>6</sup>

Essentially, if the bodies and all other things die, the eternal Self that swarms them can't be crushed; it is the living Truth and just Reality.

Just as a swan lives in water, yet its quills are never grimy by water, likewise an Advaitin lives on the planet, however, she or he is free from the influence of illusion. Advaita Vedanta is in the meantime, a school of reasoning, a religion, a religious philosophy, and a tenet of moksha. Its essential reason is all that eventually exists is the absolute Reality, *nirguna* Brahman, without characteristics.

The phenomenal world has experiential legitimacy. Be that as it may, it has no supreme reality. It is at last maya, an enchanted show, and *mithya*, false, neither genuine nor stunning. All that exists is only Brahman. One's individual self is at last, the same as Brahman, consequently the significance given to the Upanishadic statements like 'I am Brahman'<sup>7</sup> and 'You are that'.<sup>8</sup> It is just a kind of powerful numbness, *avidya*, that keeps us from understanding our actual nature as one with the Absolute, in certainty, the Absolute itself.

Once *avidya* is evacuated, there emerges the experience of the Atman's identity with Brahman. One moves towards becoming *jivan-mukta*, freed while in the body, and after death achieves moksha, identity with the Absolute. Advaita metaphysics coordinates the later *Mandukya Upanishad*, *Sankhya*, and various thoughts around that time. The Advaita thought of edification or freedom depends on an extremely significant knowledge. Not 'merging with God', as is normally misconstrued, yet realising the Absolute. By realising the Absolute one rises above the cosmic order; one is never again a limited being, rather, one rises to the level of the absolute Reality, Atman-Brahman identity. The limits of oneself vanish and one emerges into the infinite.<sup>9</sup>

### Management Lessons

A management expert says: 'The central challenge in all management is realizing the nature

of oneself. The advancement of humankind is best served when a human being connects with his or her own divinity. This is in sharp contrast to the Western view where helping others is viewed as the penultimate purpose of human existence. In Indian spirituality, the world is best served when self-understanding precedes helping others. The world is changed for the better when we change ourselves. The key to a better world is self-realisation.<sup>10</sup>

### **Dimensions of Advaita Vedanta**

Acharya Shankara says that whatever exists is Brahman, only pure consciousness. All difference and plurality are illusory, just as you see plurality in the ocean, in the waves, but the waves are water and the ocean is water. The pot is not the clay. If the pot is the clay, when the pot disappears the clay must also disappear, but it doesn't. This is very important to understand. Essence can exist without the form, but form cannot exist without the essence. When we say '*neti, neti*', it does not mean that this form is Brahman. The form is never Brahman, but it never exists apart from Brahman.

As indicated by Acharya Shankara, Brahman, the supreme cosmic Spirit, is separated from everyone and is the ultimate truth. Other than Brahman, everything else, including the universe, material articles, and people, is unreal. Brahman, depicted as the One who is omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient, is the heavenly ground of all Being. Brahman is likewise depicted as '*neti, neti*', signifying 'not this, not this', as it is *adrishya*, past the compass of the materialistic eyes. It is the premise of the material world, which thus is its illusionary change, *maya*. Brahman isn't the impact of the world while, this world is only crafted by Brahman. Brahman is said to be the source of limitless information in its most flawless structure. Brahman isn't an

item; Brahman isn't another. It is all-full, unbounded, constant, self-existent, self-amuse, self-learning and self-joy. It is *svarupa*, nature; *nirakara*, formless. It is the pith of the knower. It is the seer, *drashta*; transcendent, *turiya*; and silent witness, *sakshi*.

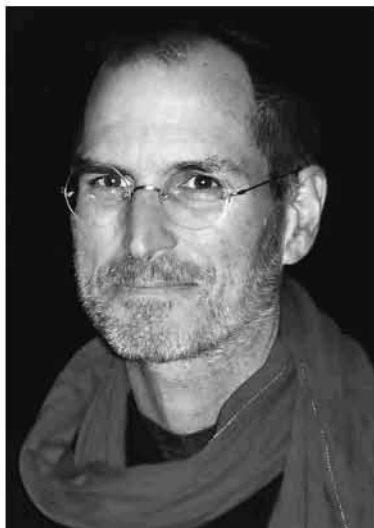
Maya is the complex illusory power of Brahman, which makes Brahman to be viewed as the material universe of independent structures: *nirguna* Brahman seems to be *saguna* Brahman.

As Acharya Shankara has clarified, *nirguna* Brahman is generic. It turns into an individual God, *saguna* Brahman, just through its relationship with *maya*.

*Saguna* Brahman and *nirguna* Brahman are not two unique Brahmans. *Nirguna* Brahman isn't the differentiation or inverse of *saguna* Brahman, and neither the other way around; if at all They were, it would be totally opposing to the Advaita Vedanta. The equivalent *nirguna* Brahman shows up as *saguna* Brahman for the devout love of enthusiasts. It is a similar Truth from two unique perspectives. *Nirguna* Brahman is the higher Brahman, the Brahman from the supra-normal perspective, *paramarthika*; *saguna* Brahman is the alleged lower Brahman, the Brahman from the relative perspective, *vyavaharika*.

Maya has two primary functions—one is to 'conceal' the Brahman from common human discernment and the other is to show the material world in its place. Maya is additionally said to be incredible, since the major reality of basic tangible recognition is totally covered up, despite the fact that all sense information entering one's mindfulness through the five faculties are *maya*. Another motivation behind why it said to be odd is that it is neither totally genuine nor totally stunning.

Maya's safe house is Brahman, however Brahman itself is safe by the hallucination of *maya*; simply like the swan and the lotus, unaffected by



Steve Jobs

its environment, which is a delineation of the Advaita Vedanta.

The Upanishads broadcast, 'Brahman alone is genuine', however we see this material world to be genuine. In what manner or capacity?

Acharya Shankara clarified this peculiarity by the idea of maya.

As indicated by Advaita Vedanta and as clarified by Acharya Shankara, when a person attempts to know or comprehend the amorphous, the unbelievable Brahman, with one's psyche and affected by maya, the Brahman that one sees, is *ishvara*. *Ishvara* is the impact of the reconciliation of maya with Brahman.

Adi Shankara utilises an analogy wherein he says that when the impression of the cosmic Being is seen through the reflection of maya, the supreme Being, *ishvara*, shows.

*Ishvara* is saguna Brahman or Brahman utilising maya as the apparatus or instrument. The *ishvara* can be acknowledged or seen by the profoundly edified. *Ishvara* might be even respected to have a character. The *ishvara* is the subject of worship. The *ishvara* is the premise of profound quality and supplier of the products of one's karma. Notwithstanding, *ishvara* is beyond the past wrongdoing and legitimacy. *Ishvara's* relationship with maya does not influence the flawlessness of *ishvara*. *Ishvara* dependably knows the solidarity of the Brahman substance and the maya-nature of the world.

Advaitins likewise have faith in the hypothesis of rebirth of jivas as plants, creatures, and people according to their karma. They accept

that bondage and suffering because of maya and just knowledge, jnana, of Brahman can obliterate maya. When maya is expelled, there exists positively no distinction between the jiva and the Brahman. Such a condition of joy, when accomplished while living, is called *jivanmukti*.

While one is in the even-minded dimension, one can revere God in any capacity and in any structure. Yet, Acharya Shankara accepts that while Vedic penances, puja, and reverential worship can lead one towards jnana, genuine learning, they can't lead one straightforwardly to moksha. One needs to endure the outcomes of one's past activities. Regardless of what number of good deeds an individual does to conceal one's wrongdoings, despite everything, one needs to confront them some day.<sup>11</sup>

### Management Lessons

Steve Jobs said: 'Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma—which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of other's opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.'<sup>12</sup>

A management teacher says:

The 'inner voice' which Steve Jobs talks about is the Atman or Self and the 'heart or intuition' symbolizes the Brahman (Universal Self or God consciousness). When you follow your heart and intuition and listen to your inner voice, you actually link your 'Atman' with the 'Brahman' and hence can unleash the infinite power to succeed. No doubt, Steve Jobs above quote is in tune with the Advaita philosophy of '*Aham Brahmasmi*' which means 'I am the Brahman or God'.

To really manage ourselves and connect with our Atman, we need to first gain complete control over our senses. For that we need to

completely detach ourselves from all material temptations through self-abnegation. As the great Indian mystic sage Ramakrishna (who was the 'guru' or master of Swami Vivekananda) said: "The world is water and the mind milk. If you pour milk into water they become one; you cannot find the pure milk any more. But turn the milk into curd and churn it into butter. Then, when that butter is placed in water, it will float. So, practice spiritual discipline in solitude and obtain the butter of knowledge and love. Even if you keep that butter in the water of the world the two will not mix. The butter will float."<sup>13</sup> ...

In the context of modern management it means that every manager should be focused on his work and at the same time be "in-sync" with the organization's vision and mission. When every worker and manager is in-sync with the Organization's Vision and mission, then it ultimately leads to excellence. This is the true essence of management by objectives as preached by Drucker.<sup>14</sup>

Acharya Shankara's preeminent Brahman is *nirguna*, without the gunas; *nirakara*, formless; *nirvisesha*, without qualities; and *akarta*, non-doer as expressed previously. Brahman is over all needs and wants. Adi Shankara says, this Atman is plainly obvious. The Atman is the premise of a wide range of insight and wisdom. Advaita basically alludes to the character of the Self, Atman and the Whole, Brahman. He stated: '*Ekameva advitiyam brahma*'; Brahman is only one, without a second.'<sup>15</sup> There is no second, yet there is the presence of a huge variety. There might be numerous stalks of sugarcane, however the juice from every one of them has a similar sweetness. Creatures are many, however their breath is the equivalent. Countries are many, however the earth is one. As such, Acharya Shankara announced to the world that it is solidarity that underlines the obvious decent variety.<sup>16</sup>

## Management Lessons

The vision or goal of an organisation should be holistic and above all the diversities, adversities, and limitations. All efforts should be oriented for the overall growth and development and for the betterment of society and sustainable living. Continuous development, learning, upgradation with a focussed energy, and a dynamic leadership to overcome the diversities, adversities, and limitations makes an organisation a vibrant entity being an asset for the economy and society.

## Five Tenets of Practical Advaita

The five tenets of practical Advaita are:

1. The belief, 'I am not this body, mind, and intellect'.
2. The belief, 'I am not the doer.'
3. The belief, 'I am not the experiencer'.
4. Efficiency in action.
5. An equanimous view.<sup>17</sup>

## Management Lessons

These are five key policies to be followed for sustainable management practices:

1. Participative-style management.
2. Team work, giving credit to teammates and taking responsibilities and challenges for team building and getting work done.
3. Alignment with the organisational vision and goals.
4. World-class managerial practices.
5. A holistic approach.

## The Impact of Advaita Vedanta

Advaita is interesting as it claims to our obligation to locate an immediate knowledge into our unique nature through the intensity of insight and comprehension. Advaita is a statement of extraordinary spiritual intellectualism, which has anchored our soul and imaginative knowledge to non-double authoritative opinion, blocking us





Shankaragaunishvara Temple at Patan

from finding the living truth of higher duality. Advaita revived quite a bit of Hindu idea and reasoning and furthermore affected discussion with the two fundamental mystical schools of Vedanta theory that were formalised later, namely, Vishishtadvaita, qualified non-dualism and Dvaita, dualism.

Advaita Vedanta further helped the converge of the old Vedic religion with famous cliques or divinities, henceforth framing a connection between higher kinds of training, for example, jnana yoga, *kriya* yoga, and so on.

In Vedanta, *satyam*, Reality, is in all respects obviously characterised and has a particular essentialness. That is to say, what exists in all the three timeframes, past, present and future, without experiencing any change; and furthermore in all the three conditions of awareness, waking state, dream state, and profound rest. It is in this manner that the supreme Reality—birthless, deathless, and unchanging—alluded to in the Upanishads as Brahman.

The world seems genuine just in the waking state; yet it is invalidated, it vanishes, in the

fantasy and profound rest states. Thus, it isn't genuine, as indicated earlier. Along these lines, the world is said to be *mithya* by Acharya Shankara. Be that as it may, numerous individuals appear to be hypersensitive to *mithya*, when it is utilised to allude to the recognisable world. Consequently, maybe, Acharya Shankara calls it *vyavaharika satta*, relative reality or *pratibhasika satta*, imaginative reality, as though to suit them.

Jiva alludes to the aware rule in every single living being, including human beings. In the profound rest state, *sushupti*, the body, psyche, and keenness are altogether discredited, rendered absolutely insufficient or insentient. Subsequently, the jiva is unified with the aware, internal life-standard, which restores the body, brain, and mind after rest. This life-guideline is the unadulterated cognisance that is equivalent in all creatures. The all-invading Brahman of the Upanishads is that unadulterated cognisance present in all jivas as their *antaryami*, inward soul.

### Management Lessons

Managers and CEOs can practise, rehearse, and implement the lessons of Advaita by considering an association with oneself and partners as one and the same, and not two distinct substances, which means considering in this manner the objectives, objects, or vision of an association and avoiding segregation between people. Besides, Advaita trains managers to conduct themselves properly and treat their subordinates in such a manner that they do not feel they are subordinates and find no distinction between the vision or objective of an association and herself or himself. There must be an extraordinary synchronisation between every one of the components of organisational dynamics and working personnel.

### Conclusion

Acharya Shankara 'was not only a great thinker

and the noblest of *Advaitik* philosophers, but he was essentially an inspired champion of *Hinduism*.<sup>18</sup> He set a model in thinking and exposition which subsequent philosophers in India have striven to follow. His Advaita reasoning is grandiose, brilliant, and special. It is an arrangement of intense way of thinking and sensible nuance. It is exceedingly fascinating, rousing, and lifting. No other way of thinking can remain before it in strength, profundity, and unobtrusive reasoning. Acharya Shankara's way of thinking is finished and flawless.

Acharya Shankara was a compelling, heavenly virtuoso. He was the greatest logician. He was a significant scholar of the principal rank. He was a sage of the most astounding acknowledgment. He was an avatara of Lord Shiva. His way of thinking has brought comfort, harmony, and enlightenment to endless people in the East and the West. The Western masterminds bow their heads at his lotus-feet. His way of thinking has relieved the distresses and burdens of the most pitiful people, and brought trust, delight, knowledge, flawlessness, opportunity, and comfort to many. His arrangement of theory commands the profound respect of the entire world.

Acharya Shankara was a scholarly and profound genius. He could encounter that radiant, supernatural state, *turiya*, wherein the jiva realises its identity with Brahman, simply like the Upanishadic soothsayers. Along these lines, the incomparable Acharya Shankara could affirm and legitimately outline the vision of the old rishis of Sanatana Dharma, the reality of Advaita. Before he left his human loop, he immovably settled this way of thinking by his skilful discourses on the *prasthanatraya*, the three essential branches of Vedanta, namely, Upanishads, Gita, and the *Brahma Sutra*. Acharya Shankara made the edifice of Hindu religion strong and sturdy by his scientific exposition of




Entrance to Acharya Shankara's Cave, Srinagar

the Upanishadic philosophy so that even today Sanatana Dharma can face modern challenges. Indian philosophy has always come to be identified with Acharya Shankara's Advaita Vedanta.<sup>19</sup>

A philosopher says:

Advaita system(s) can be divided on the basis of four doctrines 1. Nirguna-brahmavada, 2. brahma-vivartavada, 3. anirvacaniya-khyativada and 4. jivanmuktivada. In post-Shankara Advaita, these four doctrines go hand in hand. The first two doctrines have metaphysical implications, the third has both metaphysical and epistemological implications and the fourth has great soteriological significance. The works of Shankara and post-Shankara Advaitins are meaningful only when viewed against the metaphysical background of the nature of the self and the theory of the identity of self and Brahman.<sup>20</sup>

Acharya Shankara believed that all the schools, except Advaita Vedanta, had misinterpreted the Upanishads and missed their actual spirit. Shankara's main intention was to produce

the correct interpretation of Upanishads. In order to do this, Shankara skilfully drew from the religious and philosophical concepts of his predecessors as well as his opponents. In this manner, he created a varied and complex philosophical structure of his own, the Advaita Vedanta system. Thus, Adi Shankara is best characterized not as a Hindu thinker or a 'crypto-Buddhist' but as an Upanishadic Indian philosopher.<sup>21</sup> 

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# ***Karmic Immortality Versus Personal Immortality in Advaita Vedanta***

**Ovidiu Cristian Nedu**

## ***The Speculative Exaltation of Personhood in Judeo-Christian Civilisation***

**T**AKING ITS STAND on the most basic human instinct, that of survival, many systems of thought, mainly related to Judeo-Christian spirituality, speculated upon the status of human person and bestowed it ontological identity. The human condition was awarded its own substantiality, consisting generally of an immortal 'soul'. It was seen not as much as a part of the cosmos but rather as something special in the cosmos, not equalled by anything else in the universe.

Hence, a biological and instinctual matter, the instinct of survival, was turned into an ontological issue. The continuity of the personal condition was much overrated, not being considered as the continuity of some experiences, but as the persistence of some individual substance. The individual substantial entity underlying all personal experiences also allowed many speculations regarding a possible and much longed-for postmortem continuation of life. The substantial persistence of the individual entity could continue even after its separation from earthly experiences and hence the issues of individual immortality and afterlife were opened.

The exaltation of human personality went even further, taking 'theological' shapes. The

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preeminence of human being over other beings on the earth, allowed the speculation that the human personal pattern could be considered as the privileged pattern not only here but also at a cosmic level. The theistic religions take over this suggestion and state that the principle of the entire universe is a supreme person, a 'God'. With this assumption, the exaltation of personality achieved its highest form.

## ***The Person as a Series of Experiences***

Apart from these approaches that overrated the personal condition, within the religious traditions of humankind, we can also encounter more moderate approaches, which refrain from the speculative exaltation of the person. These approaches cling closer to the phenomenological data which reveal, first of all, 'personal' experiences and only to a little extent, or rather not at all, an alleged personal 'entity'. Hence, there are religious traditions that consider the human being not as 'somebody' but rather as 'something' that happens in the universe. As a mere phenomenon, as a mere experience, human condition rather 'takes place', 'happens' than 'exists'.

Considering the person as a phenomenon, as a series of experiences taking place within the large context of the cosmos, these approaches stressed less on the inner values of personhood and more on its connections with the medium where it occurs. Once the status of ontologically autonomous entity is denied to it and it

is considered as a phenomenon that takes place in the universe, the human being cannot have its own independent reason to be, but it is connected to the cosmic process and to its teleology. The human goal is somehow dependent on the cosmic goal. In Vedanta, this unifying goal is the consumption of karmic energy.

### ***Vedanta and the Gradual Experience of Human Individuation***

According to Vedanta, the individual person is a mere experience, a phenomenon, something that rather 'happens' than 'is'. Personal experiences do not represent the experiences undergone by an alleged 'person' but a phenomenon of self-restriction undergone by the universe, in its full entirety. Human lives do not pertain to some alleged 'individual beings', who would experience them, but to the universe, to its substratum, Brahman, which equally 'host' all these lives. The person is not a being, is not some kind of substantial entity. All along the personal experience, no individual 'entity' or 'being' is involved but only experiences, more or less defined, of individuation, undergone by the universe itself.

The experience of individuation starts from the very early stage of the semen. The most basic forms of the phenomenon of individuation are to be found in a man's body. An overwhelming part of them don't go further in their individuation process, being terminated from this very early stage. The privileged cases are those when such a primary form of individuation gets fertilised and its series of experiences continues in a female's body, as a foetus.

The Upanishads say: 'At the outset, this embryo comes into being within a man as semen. This radiance gathered from all the bodily parts he bears in himself, Atman, as himself, Atman. And when a man deposits it in a woman, he gives birth to it. That is its first birth.'<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, personal existence is rather an experience of individuation, which starts even from the very basic stage of male's semen. No 'being' whatsoever is involved in the evolution of life, from semen to death; it is all about more and more defined experiences of personal individuation. The issue of individuation is not as much an ontological matter, is not about the alleged apparition of a 'being' in the world but rather a phenomenal issue. The phenomenon of individuation even admits various degrees of 'quantity', of intensity, not representing the mere and compact existence of a given entity.

It dimly starts in the early stage of semen; it gets a slightly defined form as the foetal experience; it becomes more complex and endowed with more awareness as a baby. As life advances, this experience becomes more complex and more aware, until the old age when it simply starts diminishing, vanishing, until completely fading away at the moment of death. All along this process, we don't meet with any given substantial individual, which appears at once and dies at once, but only with more or less intense experiences of personal continuity. Human experience doesn't involve any sudden 'birth' of an entity but only the gradual formation of a more and more coarse and defined experience. The human being is not born at once, as a novel entity, and also does not disappear at once, at the moment of death, but gradually appears and fades, like any other phenomenon in the universe.

The individual condition is survived not by an alleged 'soul' but only by the impersonal karmic energy. The karmic energy, which engendered and maintained into being the actual personal condition, is enhanced or diminished through the experiences that take place at the individual level. When the personal condition gets terminated through death, the karmic energy projects another personal condition. All transmigration is rather a matter of energy taking

various personal shapes than of a personal 'soul' travelling through various bodies.

'And this person—this self, Atman of this person, is appointed to carry out holy rites, while the other self, after it has done all it has to do, becomes old and dies. As soon as it departs from this world, it is born again. That is its third birth' (2.1.4).

### **The Foetal Condition as a Dim Form of Individuation**

Western civilisation has usually envisaged human being as an 'entity'; therefore, especially during the last decades, it had to face the difficult problem of deciding, which is the moment this 'human entity' begins. The issue is important mainly in abortion related debates. For Vedanta, things are much more simple.<sup>2</sup> All along the human experience no 'human entity' is ever involved but it is only series of 'human' experiences. Therefore, the problem regarding the beginning of the 'human person' is simply dissolved.

The status of the foetus is highly disputed these days, especially in the Judeo-Christian world, which tries to determine whether the foetus has a 'soul' or not. More broadly speaking, the problem is to determine when a person starts to exist by oneself, as an autonomous being. For Vedanta, the status of the foetus doesn't pose any special problem; the foetus is simply a stage within the series of personal experiences, just as the semen and the adult. A foetus is only a dim form of humanity. It is human, yet, not fully human. It is just a more defined phenomenon as the semen but less than the adulthood. But, in itself, it is nothing but a mere karmic experience.

### **Transmigration of Karmic Energy**

In Vedanta, immortality does not pertain as much to the human personality or to the 'soul', but rather to the cosmic process stirred by the karmic energy. It is just this impersonal energy that never dies out,



12th Century Vedic Gods and Goddesses, Karnataka

but only takes various shapes. Vedanta claims that illusion, *maya* and ignorance, *avidya* or *ajmana* are eternal, *nitya*, but not under their various individuations as human persons. The cosmic mechanism is eternal, but none of its various shapes, not even the human ones, partake of its eternity.

Vedanta cosmology deals rather with the universe, which only occasionally manifests as humans. Thus, it is different from the Judeo-Christian world view, which is mainly focused on some alleged autonomous human beings, on human 'souls', and on their eternal destinies. The universe and its karmic energy are the main 'subjects' of the cosmic story; humans are just temporary shapes assumed by the cosmos. No human traits and values are the main reasons to be of the universe, like in Judeo-Christianity, all these being only fleeting manifestations stirred by the all-pervading karmic unrest.

Brahmanism consecrates the eschatological doctrine of metempsychosis or transmigration, which states that life is a serial experience, consisting of a succession of limited 'incarnations'. The force that engenders and propels these embodiments is the karmic energy. Every such series of life experiences ceases when the stream of karmic energy is terminated, usually as a result of religious practice.<sup>3</sup>

In one of its classical formulations, Vedantic eschatology claims that, after the death of one individual, there are two possible courses things can take: *devayana*, the path of gods and *pitriyana*, the path of the ancestors. Both are rather 'karmic' paths, courses karmic energy can take and not destinies assumed by a personality.

*Devayana* is the course of karmic annihilation, of liberation, of absolute dissolution into Brahman. The person liberated through the knowledge of the true reality, Brahman, 'burns' all the karmic energy that propels her or him into being and, at the moment of death, when even the *prarabdha* karma, karma already 'solidified' as the body, vanishes, she or he simply disappears as a 'person', being re-absorbed into the ultimate reality. *Devayana* is not as much a path taken by an individual to any paradise but rather a path of 'cleansing' reality, of totally purifying it from a previously assumed personal condition. It is not as much the individual person, which gets purified, but rather reality itself gets rid of one previously existing illusion, of one illusory individual. The limited and egocentric person and all the tarnish it involves simply vanish. This process is rather undergone by reality than by the person; the person is that which is cleansed of, not that which is cleansed.

*Pitriyana* means the continuation of transmigration. It is the path taken over by the karmic energy accumulated by an individual person which didn't liberate through the karma-burning knowledge. Hence, within such an individual condition, karmic energy kept on being produced and, at the moment of death, the accumulated karmic energy takes over the path of *pitriyana*, towards a new incarnation.

The name of this path is explained by the fact that the first body where a new individual stream of experiences exists is the body of her or his father, where she or he exists as semen. Later on,

the father will place this new individual within a mother's womb and, only after the months of gestation, the personal experience takes place within a body of one's own.

### ***Karmic Transmigration as Precluding Personal Immortality***

The doctrine of transmigration rather precludes personal immortality, the postmortem survival of the person itself. The only thing that survives death is the impersonal karmic energy that can materialise under the most diverse individual conditions. Therefore, the chain of reincarnations displays a high degree of heterogeneity, of typological discontinuity. The individual conditions assumed along transmigration are very diverse, there being almost no continuity of a personal typology.

'But whoever answers it not, the person having become rain, it rains down here. Either as a worm, or as an insect or as fish or as a bird, or as a lion, or as a boar, or as a snake, or as a tiger, or as a person or as some other in this or that condition. One is born again according to one's deeds, according to one's knowledge.'<sup>4</sup>

The subject, the substratum of the metempsychotic process is not an individual or a person; any particular person is rather a mere stage of this process. Therefore, this process is not mainly driven by personal values and causes; the person only collaterally occurs all along it. A personal condition means just a simple stage integrated in the broad metempsychotic process, without being the ultimate 'beneficiary' of this process.

The human condition is not superior to the rest of the universe; it is rather integrated within the universe, participating in its evolution. The universe is not a mere scene for the human destiny; rather, the universe, as a whole, is the 'subject' of the cosmic process, in which human beings have a limited karmic



participation. Human values, personal determinations are nothing but temporary manifestations of karmic energy, without being able to expand beyond biological death. Their only postmortem continuity consists merely in the karmic energy that personal life engenders. What matters in this whole process is the karmic balance, the karmic economy and not the 'salvation' or the 'immortalisation' of the personal condition.


The problem of the postmortem fate of the individual, of one's 'afterlife' cannot be even raised. All personal determinations, including memories and individual traits, cease at the moment of death. There is nothing individual to go beyond death, since there is no support that could 'carry' the personal determinations to another incarnation.

### **Karmic Economy Instead of Personal Posthumous Exaltation**

The limitation of the personal condition to earthly life, where it goes on for a while, makes it impossible to exhort any 'heavenly' values and prospects to the human being. Even if humans participate in a vast cosmic process, in a broad metempsychotic process, as individuals, all they can do is to have a certain impact upon this process, upon its karmic economy. But it is impossible that a human, as an 'individual', may appropriate for one's own personal condition, for the exaltation of one's individuality, something from the 'divinity' of the cosmic mechanism.

The individual condition is nothing but a stage comprised in a cosmic scale process and its role is not to accede to an alleged superior postmortem condition but only to 'burn', to exhaust some karmic energies. What survives the death of an individual is the cosmos, the great metempsychotic process, in which all individual lives participate, with a particular and limited karmic

impact. There is no postmortem destiny, no postmortem reward or punishment allowed to the individual person; it is all about the karmic impact a human life has upon the deployment of the cosmic process, *brahma-chakra*. The karmic energy accumulated during a life, impersonal in its own nature, is the one that goes beyond death. Life is rather about karmic energy than about individual salvation.

The meaning of life does not consist in an individual accomplishment but only in the individual participation to the great karmic process unto which everyone has a certain impact. The natural task of a person is to 'burn' the karma gathered within one's personal condition. The 'reward' for accomplishing one's task is not reaching an alleged superior individual postmortem condition; it is all about consuming karma, about the optimization of this ever-going process. 

### **Notes and References**

1. *Aitareya Upanishad*, 2.1.1.
2. For an account of the foetal condition according to Indian folklore and culture, including tribal communities, see Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, 'The After-Life in Indian Tribal Belief', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 83/1 (January-June, 1953), 37–49.
3. A discussion on transmigration, as it dimly appears in Vedic literature, can be found in Paul Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upanishads*, trans. A S Geden (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1906), 324–32. Accounts of *Devayana* and *Pitriyana* can be found in *The Philosophy of the Upanishads*, 334–8. Also see Hermann Oldenberg, *The Doctrine of the Upanishads and the Early Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), 64. For a critical approach of the theory of transmigration, which stresses upon the difficulties involved by identifying the subject who transmigrates, see Brian Hodgkinson, *The Essence of Vedanta: The Ancient Wisdom of Indian Philosophy* (Hertfordshire: Eagle, 2006), 157–9.
4. *Kausitaki Brahmana Upanishad*, 1.2.



# Advaita and the Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object

Paul Schweizer

THIS PAPER EXPLORES Acharya Shankara's position on autonomous consciousness or *chit*, as the fundamental reality. As such, *chit* transcends subject-object duality and Acharya Shankara holds that consciousness is ultimately *nirvishayaka* or non-intentional. I compare and contrast the Advaita view with the contemporary phenomenological account, wherein consciousness is held to be essentially intentional, so that consciousness is always *of* or *about* some object or content, and where consciousness without an object is deemed conceptually impossible.

## Absolute Consciousness

The ontological monism of Acharya Shankara's Advaita Vedanta philosophy holds that pure consciousness or *chit*, is the one fundamental substance. Thus, reality is held to be ultimately singular in nature, only pure consciousness genuinely exists and is ontologically autonomous, while all other phenomena that appear to exist are metaphysically dependent upon pure consciousness. On the Advaita analysis, *chit* is characterised as absolute and unconditioned awareness, as immutable and inactive, formless and without limiting characteristics.

The history of Indian philosophy has been dynamically shaped by the longstanding

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controversies within Hinduism between its six rival *darshanas*, and additionally between orthodox Hinduism and the two heterodox schools of Buddhism and Jainism. On the topic of consciousness, one of the traditional issues of controversy revolved around the question of whether or not consciousness, by its essential nature, must be *of* an object. In the conventional terminology of disputation, this is the question of whether it is *savishayaka* or *nirvishayaka*, that is, intrinsically intentional or not. In addition, the debate concerned the issue: does consciousness belong to someone—does it have a 'place', or is it 'placeless', belonging to no one? In disputational terms, is it *ashraya* or *nirashraya*?

According to Acharya Shankara's analysis, *chit* is both *nirvishayaka* and *nirashraya*, ultimately both non-intentional and belonging to no one. And because *chit* is held to be *nirvishayaka*, pure consciousness itself is not dependent on any specific content or thing towards which it appears to be directed. Consciousness *of* an object is a secondary and dependent mode, while the metaphysically fundamental mode is pure consciousness *without* an object. Hence, in sharp contrast to the notions of consciousness prevalent in the Western philosophical tradition, *chit* is intrinsically independent of any particular *objects* that may appear to occupy the field of consciousness.

In common with the Advaita Vedanta stance, various forms of metaphysical idealism

in Western philosophy also maintain a seemingly related form of ontological monism. However, it is important to highlight a crucial distinction here, since in contrast to Western idealism, it would be incorrect to attribute to Acharya Shankara the view that reality is essentially *mental* in nature. For Acharya Shankara, the mind is not to be identified with pure consciousness or *chit*, and as noted above, he not only maintains that *chit* is not intrinsically directed towards an object, but also that it is *nirashraya*, it has no place and belongs to no one. Hence, it belongs to no particular mind and pure consciousness itself must be sharply distinguished from that which is properly mental.

Although non-dualistic, Advaita ontology is nonetheless committed to a radical *discontinuity* between unqualified, immutable, inactive *chit* on the one hand, versus the manifest world of attributes and form on the other. It is to this latter realm that the mind belongs. According to Acharya Shankara, pure unconditioned awareness, as such, must be distinguished from the particular 'states of consciousness' associated with individual agents at specific times. It is these particular mental states that are directed towards objects and where the apparent subject-object duality arises.

### Conscious Mental States

Advaita monism holds that the multifaceted, kaleidoscopic and ever-changing material world is not ontologically autonomous, but rather is ultimately an 'illusion' sustained by *maya*. The individual human mind and body are manifestations of this illusory material realm. Movement and form are attributes of matter, and they are also attributes of thought, which is a manifestation of matter. In stark contrast, pure consciousness is intrinsically formless and unchanging. The cognitive processes that characterise the mind are



Kapila Muni's Statue in Nashik, Maharashtra

governed by the unconscious and mechanical forces of the material realm, and to this extent mental phenomena are viewed in purely 'naturalistic' terms. The unfolding of thought forms is simply the result of appropriate transformations of the unconscious material world, the turning of the wheels of *maya*.

Dualistic ontologies have the pronounced difficulty of accounting for the *seeming* interaction between the two independent realms of existence. In Western forms of mind-matter dualism, the relation between material and mental substance drives the long-standing and deeply recalcitrant mind-body problem. Cartesian interactive dualism posits a causal link between mind and matter, and is thus seen to be at odds with physical conservation laws; while the non-interactive model of Leibniz and Locke requires divine intervention to maintain a 'pre-established harmony' between independent realms. In comparison, on the mind-consciousness dualism

of the Sankhya-yoga philosophical tradition, there is the concomitant difficulty of explaining how the absolute and unconditioned consciousness of purusha can 'interact' with the unconscious material-mental structures of prakriti to yield conscious mental states.<sup>1</sup>

The Advaita philosophy of consciousness monism has a not dissimilar problem in accounting for the metaphysical status of the manifest world, and the relation between maya and pure consciousness that makes it seem *as if* there are real conscious mental states. Acharya Shankara invokes the subtle notion of 'superimposition', *adhyasa*, to explain the general projection of attributes and form onto unqualified and unconditioned basic reality. In the current discussion, I will not delve into this recondite topic per se, but will instead just touch on the phenomenon of 'conditioned' consciousness in the context of individual mental states. As viewed from the perspective *within* the phenomenal realm, pure *chit* is both transcendent but also immanent. In terms of immanence, pure consciousness persists in phenomenal experience as the inner self or 'witness', *sakshin*, that constitutes the ultimate seat of awareness, the ground of sentience.<sup>2</sup> In this aspect, *chit* is compared to a light, which is self-luminous and self-revealing. Thus *chit* dwells 'inside' the mind as the self-luminous witness consciousness.

From a more 'outside' or external perspective, when explaining how conscious mental states and events are possible, pure consciousness is again standardly compared to a light, which in this case illuminates the particular material configurations or 'shapes' assumed by the mind. Hence, on the Advaita account, thought processes and mental events are conscious only to the extent that they receive 'illumination' from *chit*. The Sanskrit term *manas* is often translated directly as 'mind', although it is more

accurate to observe that it is the combination of both *manas* and *buddhi* that roughly corresponds to the objective or impersonal mental faculties in Western philosophical discourse, and, as will be explicated below, it is *buddhi* that is centrally involved in the occurrence of particular conscious experiences.

*Manas* is viewed essentially as an organ, the special organ of cognition, just as the eyes are the special organs of sight. Indeed, *manas* is held to be intimately connected with perception, since the raw data supplied by the senses must be ordered and categorised with respect to a conceptual-linguistic scheme before various objects can be perceived *as* members of their respective categories, and as inhabiting a world characterised by the systematic and distinguishable attributes with which sense experience is normally imbued. This imposition of conceptual-linguistic structure on the field of raw sensation is one of the basal activities of *manas*, and forms the distinction between brute sensation, *nirvikalpaka*, as opposed to differentiated perception, *savikalpaka*.

In addition to its perceptual activities, *manas* is held to be responsible for the cognitive functions of analysis, deliberation, and decision. It is closely allied to *buddhi*, which is somewhat roughly translated as the faculty of 'intellect' or 'reason'. *Buddhi* is a subtler and more powerful faculty than *manas*, and is responsible for higher level intellectual functions, which require intuition, insight, and reflection. The Indian *buddhi* is in some ways comparable to the Greek *nous*, while *manas* is responsible for lower level discursive thought and analysis. But *buddhi* is still regarded as a manifestation of unconscious maya, albeit the subtlest and refined form that material patterns can assume.

So, to return to the interplay of consciousness and matter, resulting in apparently conscious

mental events, it is the subtle 'thought forms' of the *buddhi* that allow mental events to appear conscious, because the refined *buddhi* substance is held to be 'transparent' to the light of consciousness. Thus, in order for conscious thoughts and perceptual experiences to take place, the 'translucent' *buddhi* receives representational forms, both perceptual and conceptual, from *manas*, the 'organ of cognition', and it receives conscious 'light' from *chit*. So, the cognitive structures received from *manas* are illuminated by an external source, and in this manner specific mental structures can appear conscious.

To fully exploit the optical analogy, the conscious representational structures involved in, say, visual perception, can be compared to transparent photographic slides. The photographic image stored in the film is composed of matter, but it is both representational and translucent. Therefore, when the film is held up to an external light source, such as the sun, the illuminated representation is analogous to the structures of perceptual experience that glow with the sentience of *chit*. Only the subtle thought-forms of *buddhi* are translucent with the light of *chit*, while other configurations of matter are opaque to this radiance. And this is why minds appear to be the loci of sentience in the realm of *maya*, while stones and tables cannot assume conscious guise.

Pure consciousness illuminates the material thought-forms of the *buddhi*, thereby yielding the appearance of sentient states that are directed towards particular objects and cognitive contents. But from the perspective of pure consciousness, this directedness is merely an appearance. Consciousness as such is not directed towards these objects, it has no intention to illuminate the limited material structures in question, and it is completely independent of the mental phenomena upon which its light happens to fall. As explicated by Karl Potter, 'whereas

ordinary awareness not only has an object but also requires it as the occasion for that specific piece of awareness or judgment, pure consciousness has no more relation to its objects than does the sun that shines on everything without being in the least affected by or dependent on things.'<sup>3</sup>

### Consciousness and Space

Potter thus appeals to sunlight as an appropriate metaphor for the non-intentional nature of pure consciousness. But an even more fitting analogy is introduced in the following passage from Acharya Shankara, which begins with the use of light and progresses to a comparison with space: 'Pure and changeless consciousness I am by nature, devoid of objects to illumine. ... Beginningless and devoid of attributes, I have neither actions nor their results. ... Though in a body, I do not get attached on account of my subtleness, like space which, though all pervading, does not get tainted.'<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, space provides an extremely apt metaphor when trying to address the conceptual question of 'how is pure consciousness itself to be understood; what would provide an appropriate *structural model* for such a phenomenon?' And the highly abstract notion of physical space supplies a fascinating answer. To the ancient Greek classification of the world as consisting of the four ultimate components of earth, water, fire and air, the Indians added a fifth and all pervasive element, *akasha*, which is more or less equivalent to classical 'ether' or 'space'. As a basic metaphysical substance, pure consciousness is held to possess several essential features in common with this most subtle, and in some respects most fundamental of the physical elements.

Consciousness, like space, is ontologically independent of the objects that may happen to fill or occupy it. Thus consciousness *of* an object



Franz Brentano (1838–1917)

is a secondary, non-fundamental mode, analogous to space that is occupied. In normal circumstances, we are mostly concerned with and cognisant of space with things in it, and this can hide the fact that space itself is not ontologically dependent on its occupants. Similarly, in normal circumstances, we are mostly concerned with the field of

*consciousness* only insofar as it is directed towards particular things and contents, insofar as it has an intentional object. And, according to the Advaita view, this can obscure the fact that pure consciousness itself does not depend on the things that we happen to be conscious of.

Another related aspect in which consciousness is held to resemble space is that, in addition to being ontologically self-sustaining, space cannot, even in principle, be *affected* by the objects which fill it. Space itself remains detached and unalterable, even when there are things 'taking it up'. Space is totally inert; it cannot be displaced or disturbed, and it does not react in any way with its contents. This is very much in contrast to *air*, for example. Objects occupying a place in the atmosphere must *displace* the fluid that would otherwise occupy the same spatial location. And objects moving through a gaseous medium cause turbulence and friction, propagate sound waves and generate heat. The atmosphere will chemically interact with the surface of these objects, resulting in corrosion, weathering, and the like.

In contrast, space is absolutely detached, passive and inert. Space *cannot* be touched or altered by the things that fill it. And conversely, space cannot affect its occupants. So it is significant

that this highly abstract notion of *akasha* or space, rather than air, is used as the structural metaphor for consciousness. Clearly, the Indian notion of *akasha* is in many ways comparable to the Newtonian conception of 'absolute space', and hence on this view, consciousness itself is structurally analogous to Newton's classical conception of space as an independently real, objective, and fundamentally detached manifold.<sup>5</sup>

### Comparison with Western Phenomenology

In sharp contrast to the Advaita view, the phenomenological tradition of Western philosophy maintains that all mental states, by their very nature, must be directed towards something, and hence pure, non-intentional consciousness is ruled out as theoretically impossible. According to the phenomenological account, consciousness is essentially intentional, conscious states are always *of* or *about* something, although this 'something' may well be a non-existent object, such as Pegasus or Meinong's 'Golden Mountain'. Husserl's analysis stems from his modification and development of the notion of intentionality as revived by his teacher Franz Brentano, who adopted the notion as a basic criterion for distinguishing the properly mental from the purely physical phenomena. And for Brentano as well, consciousness is viewed as essentially intentional, so that the very notion of consciousness without an object is seen as self-contradictory.

Thus, the phenomenological stance on the intentionality of consciousness is in opposition to the Advaita analysis on two major points. First, the latter claims that the mind and the processes by which it is directed to external objects are essentially physical in nature, while Brentano uses directedness as the key feature distinguishing minds from mere physical systems. Second, Acharya Shankara holds that, far from

being self-contradictory, consciousness without an object is indeed fundamental, while directed states of awareness comprise a secondary and dependent mode. In contrast, Husserl maintains that there is an indissoluble link between consciousness and 'meaning', where this meaning encompasses both the semantical directedness of Frege's *Sinn*, which does the essential work of linguistic reference, as well as a perceptual form of directedness to account for conscious experiences of, for example, the-tree-as-perceived, that is, as seen from a particular perspective on a particular occasion. In phenomenological terminology, it is the noema that comprises this structured mode of presentation inherent in all episodes of consciousness.

Husserl's position is notoriously intricate and complex, and in the following discussion I will rely heavily on Aron Gurwitsch's elucidation. Regarding Husserl's stance on the intentionality of consciousness, Gurwitsch states: 'It pertains to the essential nature of acts of consciousness to be related and correspond to noemata ... *consciousness must be defined as a noetic-noematic correlation*, that is to say, a correlation between items pertaining to two heterogeneous planes: on the one hand the plane of temporal psychological events, and on the other hand that of ... ideal entities that are the noemata, or meanings understood in the broader sense.'<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, according to Gurwitsch, consciousness is then to be characterised by an intrinsic duality between psychological events and the correlated ideal objects, where this duality takes the place of Descartes's schism between thinking substance and extended substance.

Thus, while Acharya Shankara's views on metaphysically autonomous *chit* are highly analogous to the classical Newtonian conception of absolute space, the contrasting phenomenological stance on the intentionality of

consciousness is in many ways comparable to Leibniz's competing views on physical space. In opposition to the Newtonian camp, Leibniz and his followers put forward an alternative and rather deflationary account. They deny that space, as such, has any independent reality. The only things that properly exist are material entities and physical events. All spatial assertions should be interpreted not as attributing features to space *itself*, but rather as attributing spatial *relations* between material existents. So objects 'occupy' space only to the extent that they bear the salient geometrical relations to other bodies and to subparts of themselves as extended objects.

As with the Leibnizian notion of relational space, on Husserl's model of intentional consciousness, there is no provision for a substantive or real structure, over and above conscious states that are *directed*, that is, that are determined by the *relation* of subject to object.

### **The Vedantic Theory of Intentional States**

According to Acharya Shankara, pure unconditioned awareness, as such, must be distinguished from the particular 'states of consciousness' associated with individual agents at specific times. Though the underlying story is quite different, these states of consciousness are meant to capture the same basic set of phenomena as that which Gurwitsch calls 'acts of consciousness', namely, particular instances of directed conscious experience. However, the Indian view diverges from the phenomenological analysis with respect to the fundamental status of these ordinary states. It argues that the more basic absolute consciousness is a necessary precondition



Edmund Husserl (1859–1938)





Aron Gurwitsch (1901–1973)

for these directed states, *if* they are to appear conscious. Conversely, if these directed states are taken on their own, they remain both unconscious and purely material. But, as the following section will maintain, in spite of their extreme differences, there is still far

wider scope for agreement between the two frameworks than might first be suspected.

In a marked contrast to the contemporary Western stance, Vedantic philosophy takes an extremely non-metaphorical approach to intentionality. The paradigmatic case is sense perception, where the mind is said to literally ‘go out’, ‘*prapya-kari*’,<sup>7</sup> through the sense organs into the world and ‘assume the form’ of the objects of perception and knowledge. Thus intentional directedness is founded on a veritable ‘noetic ray’, normally described as ‘of the nature of light’ or *tejas*, which itself makes actual contact with the external objects on which the mind is focussed. When the mind thus assimilates the form of its external object, this results in an appropriate modification of *manas*, the organ of cognition. This modification of *manas*, this structural reflection or mental likeness, then becomes manifest in the *buddhi* substance and is illuminated by pure consciousness, thus resulting in a particular directed conscious state.

So a conscious state of an individual agent, directed towards a specific object, is treated as a metaphysical hybrid. The properly *intentional* aspect of this hybrid is seen as an alteration of the ‘inner instrument’, namely, a modification of *manas* effected by its literal contact with its

respective object, which cognitive modification is then transferred to the vitreous *buddhi* substrate. And this component of the hybrid state is purely mechanical or ‘naturalistic’, a direct consequence of the causal transformations governing the physical domain. In a more contemporary raiment, this could be seen as a physically implemented formal representation or form of information processing. Then this structural modification of the mental substrate, a kind of essentialist representation, is passively illuminated by pure consciousness, resulting in a ‘directed’ configuration of matter that appears to be sentient. Hence, on this account the mind is held to be in motion and actively extends into space, rather than remaining passive in its cognitive container, merely the recipient of causal impingements from the outside world. The Vedantic view does not posit an ontological gulf separating mind from matter, and thus the mind can actively ‘pervade’ objects and modify itself in response to the structures it contacts.

In contrast, phenomenological views in particular, and Western views in general, tend to be highly metaphorical about intentional ‘powers’. The mind is said to be ‘directed towards’ objects, it has an intentional ‘aim’, and the like, but these locutions tend to lack explicit force. To be sure, on Husserl’s view, the noema serve as the vehicle by which the mind is directed. It is thus the correlation with the salient noema that gives the mind intentional access to an external realm. According to Gurwitsch, ‘the perceptual noema must not be mistaken for an Idea in the Cartesian sense—that is to say, the substitute for, or representative of, a reality only mediately accessible’.<sup>8</sup> And again: ‘Because of the intentionality of consciousness, we are in direct contact with the world’ (66). Thus, for Husserl, there is a strong attempt to repudiate the Cartesian

heritage that preconditions so much of Western philosophical thought about the mind.

According to Gurwitsch: 'The temporal events called "acts of consciousness" have the peculiarity of being actualizations or apprehensions of meanings, the terms "apprehension" and "meaning" being understood in a very general sense beyond the special case of symbolic expressions' (65). It is certainly worth noting that these 'actualizations or apprehensions of meanings' are highly analogous to the Vedantic 'modifications of *manas*', where both types of structured event are meant to characterise the internal or subjective-mental reality of perceiving and understanding.

Indeed, Gurwitsch's talk of 'consciousness' as a correlation between items from different planes, the psychological and the noematic, looks more like the characterisation of particular, content-laden mental states, rather than a characterisation of *consciousness* simpliciter. Apparently, both of these correlated items, when taken separately, remain unconscious. In this manner, 'apprehensions of meaning' and 'modifications of *manas*' are reasonably compatible, except that in the Indian model there is only one plane, the material, involved. But in terms of intentional structure and the unconscious status of the elements invoked, there is a fair degree of resemblance between the two analyses of directed mental states.

Both perspectives could still agree that particular mental states with specific content or form must, by their very nature, be intentional. To deny this would seem to be committing a kind of self-contradiction. And Acharya Shankara could potentially agree with the phenomenologist insofar as the Vedantin's pure, autonomous consciousness is not properly a *mental state*. In this regard, all conscious *mental states* are intentional for Acharya Shankara as well, because pure consciousness is said to illuminate the 'directed'

modifications of matter intrinsic to such states.

So the critical differences obviously emerge with respect to the status and role of pure consciousness. The distinctively phenomenological claim that pure, undirected consciousness *itself* is theoretically impossible seems much less compelling than the weaker assertion just delineated, namely, that all conscious *mental states* must be intentional. What are the underlying grounds for this additional claim, and what is the force of the 'impossibility'? Actuality is generally accepted as a proof of possibility, and in the final section, I will examine some traditional notions regarding the experiential reality of pure consciousness.

### **Mystical Experience**

Ultimately, the Advaita stance on pure, objectless consciousness cannot be established or derived as the conclusion of a deductive argument or intricate chain of philosophical reasoning. According to Acharya Shankara, the real nature of consciousness does not follow from mere argumentation or rational speculation. And similarly, empirical investigation and scientific methodology will also not yield this knowledge.

Especially in the past 400 years, Western science has made remarkable progress and should in no way be downplayed or underestimated, empirical investigation and scientific theorising are extremely powerful tools. However, it is essential to note that empirical methods cannot in themselves underwrite a theoretical closure principle. Physics provides us with a deep and rigorous grasp of physical reality, but it cannot support the further *metaphysical* claim that physical theory is fully exhaustive, and that there is nothing beyond its scope. Such a closure principle does not follow from empirical investigation or scientific experimentation, and it is entirely consistent with physical theory that the




closure principle is *false*. Thus, if one defines ‘empiricism’ as the doctrine that we should only accept that which can be empirically established, then the closure principle is in fact *inconsistent* with empiricism.

Similar considerations also apply to the scope and limits of human reason itself. Without the prior intellectual resources of advanced mathematics, there could be no physics. The *a priori* knowledge gained through logic, mathematics, and conceptual analysis provides the essential foundation upon which our mighty scientific edifices are constructed. But these abstract disciplines are equally incapable of underwriting their own theoretical closure principle. It is entirely consistent with logic, mathematics, and human reason that there are truths which transcend the scope of these intellectual methods. Thus, if one defines ‘rationalism’ as the doctrine that we should only accept that which can be established on the grounds of reason and logic, then the closure principle is in fact *inconsistent* with rationalism.

Hence, the Advaita stance on pure, objectless consciousness is entirely compatible with a ‘hard-headed’ acceptance of all the truths that can be legitimately derived on the basis of both science and reason. But according to Acharya Shankara, the ultimate nature of consciousness cannot be accessed by empirical or rational methods. It transcends mental processes in general and cannot be grasped via an act of cognition, since all cognitive activity incorporates the subject-object duality. Pure, autonomous consciousness can only be accessed through the mystical experience of direct realisation. Because pure, absolute consciousness is held to be self-luminous, it can be directly and immediately self-realised.<sup>9</sup>

According to those who have attained this realisation, Brahman, the ultimate Reality

underlying the external universe, is identical to Atman, the ultimate Reality underlying the inner self. ‘*Ayam atma brahma*; this Atman is Brahman.’<sup>10</sup> ‘*Tat tvam asi*; you are That.’<sup>11</sup> The non-duality of pure consciousness without an object thus closes the circle, inner and outer are experienced as one. And although it is held to transcend conceptual understanding or linguistic characterisation, this singular reality is canonically depicted as *sat, chit, ananda*—existence, consciousness, bliss. 

## References

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8. ‘Husserl’s Theory of the Intentionality of Consciousness’, 68.
9. For an insightful cross-cultural defence of the epistemic value of mystical experience see Ayon Maharaj, *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality* (New Delhi: Oxford University, 2018).
10. *Mandukya Upanishad*, 1.2.
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# ***The Advaita Vedanta Critique of the Nyaya-Vaisheshika Category of Inherence***

**Cameron Wright**

THE DEVELOPMENT OF METAPHYSICS in India is broadly characterised in Western scholarship by a debate between two general categories, one being Realist and the other being Idealist or anti-Realist in orientation. The most characteristic school of realist thought is the combined tradition of the Nyaya-Vaisheshika. This school provides a detailed ontology of categories, each of which defines a distinct type of existing reality to which words correspond. Accordingly, this school holds an absolute realist position regarding the objects of perceptual awareness. The world consists of a plurality of parts, ultimately reducible to minute atoms.

By contrast stands the tradition of Advaita Vedanta. Vedanta is broadly committed to a strict reliance and interpretation of the Vedas and the Upanishads, the ancient Hindu scriptures. Advaita indicates the commitment to a non-dual metaphysics which seeks to establish that Brahman is the unified and undifferentiated ground of the world. Advaita Vedanta is motivated by a soteriology or theory of liberation, which through the mystical realisation that perceptual experience and the distinct objects of the world are illusory, leads to the awareness of the unity of one's self with Brahman.<sup>1</sup>

What I wish to argue in this paper is that the Advaitin refutations of the relational category of

inherence are the most important for their defeat of the Nyaya-Vaisheshika ontological system. By attacking inherence, the Advaitins not only show that inherence fails to explain the relations between the various ontic categories but they also demonstrate that inherence does not help prove distinctness, but rather that the Vaisheshika philosophers already assume distinctness in positing inherence. The category of inherence is the keystone category that provides a sort of ontic glue by which the other distinct categories are combined or related. If the category of inherence fails to sufficiently explain how the various ontological categories are related, the edifice of the Realist's ontology collapses.

The Vaisheshika school of philosophy dates to possibly as early as 150 CE, with the *Vaisheshika Sutra* of Kanada. As a realist school, Vaisheshika is closely allied with the Nyaya school, which originated with the *Nyaya Sutra* of Gautama around 200 CE (38, 41, 325). The Vaisheshika philosophers engage primarily in metaphysical investigations and posit a theory of the world consisting of atoms or *vaisheshika*, ultimate particulars.<sup>2</sup> Nyaya is predominantly a school of logical investigation into the correct means of knowledge. It could be aptly called the science of correct reasoning.<sup>3</sup>

Originally distinct, the two schools gradually merged into a shared tradition, as Nyaya accepted the metaphysical theories of atomism and Vaisheshika utilised the logical and

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epistemological theories of Nyaya. A core text of this shared tradition is the *Padarthadharma-samgraha* of Prashastapada. In this text, which serves as a commentary on the *Vaisheshika-sutra*, Prashastapada delineates a system of categories, or *padartha*. These *padartha* are the things and classes of things to which words refer, the units of predication that form the basis of the ontological commitment of the Nyaya-Vaisheshika.<sup>4</sup>

Here I will present the theory of ontological categories in detail. This will not only show the reader the various ontic types indicated by the categories but will also reveal why it is necessary for the Vaisheshika to explain how these categories are related to one another, which leads them to posit the category of inherence. The categories are contributed specifically by the Vaisheshika part of the tradition, for which reason I will most often refer to the positions I present as Vaisheshika. As Realists, both Nyaya and Vaisheshika are committed to the reality of the objects of experience. Perceptual awareness is veridical awareness. The distinctions found in experience are real distinctions among objects which exist independently of the experiencer and the properties of those objects. In particular, the Nyaya-Vaisheshika are realists about the referents of words.<sup>5</sup>

Three of these categories identify referents which are said to actually 'exist' or possess *sat* or being. The first of these is *dravya* or substance. Substance is identified by the grammatical subject of speech. Substance is the basis of predication, the subject in which qualities inhere and to which changes occur. There are two types of substances: composite and non-composite. Composite substances are generally any objects of experience one may encounter in everyday life, such as persons, plants, animals, and artificial objects. Composite substances consist of component parts, such as atoms. Atoms are minute, non-composite substances.

These atoms are the ultimate constituents of the material world. The atoms are eternal, extension-less and un-produced. The composite substances which consist of atoms are not eternal. Spatial extension arises with the conjunction of atoms, as one finds with the extended composite substances of common experience. Atoms are of four types, earth, water, fire, and air, all which combine to form the varying and multiple types of objects found in the world. Other non-composite substances include ether, selves, minds, space, and time. Not only are these not composite substances, but they are also not atomic.<sup>6</sup>

Prashastapada provides examples of how the existence of non-composite substances is inferred from the relationship between experience and the acts of speech and naming. He speaks of time as 'the cause of the [relative] notions of "priority" "posteriority", or "simultaneity" and "succession", and of "late" and "soon".<sup>7</sup> The existence of time also accounts for the observations of substantial change whereby things come into being and go out of being. From the existence of space 'arise the ten notions [the ordinal directions] ... Below and Above—with regard to one corporeal (material) object considered with reference to another material object as the starting point or limit. Specially so, as there is no other cause available for these notions' (ibid.).

According to Prashastapada, without the existence of these substances, such concepts and words would have no real referents, and would be rendered meaningless. This is particularly so in regard to the self, as Prashastapada writes: 'We find the word "I" used in the Veda as well as in ordinary parlance, by learned persons; and this word could not be without something that it would denote' (407).

Along with substance, the categories of *guna* or quality, and *karma* or motion, have causal efficacy. Both are found only to be present in

substances. Broadly, qualities and motions are both dharmas or properties. Qualities are those things which inhere in substances, or more specifically qualify substances. Qualities such as size, shape, texture, colour, extension, smell, and so on, qualify particular substances. There are also qualities which are relational, such as conjunctions. In this ontological context, the word ‘conjunction’ indicates a relation between substances, which is a mere combination or proximity. This combination is not like the inseparable relational tie of inherence.

Conjunctions qualify multiple substances in their relation to one another. Conjunctions may qualify substances as qualities, but motions are responsible for bringing about conjunctions. Motions are the activity of substances. Movements up or down or in any direction, any activity, or change in position belong to this category. The causal power of bringing about conjunction and disjunction are exclusive to motions. Motions are non-material causes, which are capable of producing effects in other substances beyond the single substances in which they inhere.<sup>8</sup>

The next three categories—universal, individualiser, and inherence—are said to be present but not to exist independently in the way substance and its properties do. They are present in that they are available to perception and can be referred to in speech.<sup>9</sup> As Prashastapada puts it, these have ‘the character of having their sole being within themselves, having ... the cognitive faculty as their sole indicator, of not being an effect, of not being a cause ... of being eternal, and of not being expressible by the word “*artha*” ‘thing’.<sup>10</sup>

Let’s consider each of these categories in turn.



Acharya Kanada

The category of *samanya* or universal, is what makes multiple distinct things members of the same kind. A universal could also be thought of as a ‘natural kind’, even though universals apply to human-made artefacts as well. Universals are directly cognised from the objects perceived according to the Vaiśeṣikas. As Prashastapada explains, ‘When we cognise [all] individual objects as belong [sic] simultaneously to a particular class, and we have such cognitions repeatedly, then there is produced in our minds an impression; and when in view of this impression we review those past cognitions, we come to recognise a certain factor that inheres in every one of the objects cognised; and it is this factor that constitutes the universal’ (420).

The Vaiśeṣika take this observation as the basis of their view that universals are directly cognised from experience.<sup>11</sup> For a given object, being a member of a species among substances is granted by the universal of that species. For all vehicles, the universal of ‘car-hood’ inheres, for all circles ‘circularity’, for all trees a certain ‘tree-ness’ or ‘being a large-sized, woody plant’, or for humans perhaps ‘being a rational animal’.

Given that universals are directly cognised in experience; universals likewise provide the basis for linguistic expressions which utilise

general or universal terms. The ideas of inclusion or universality would be empty if it weren't for the existence of universals as real referents, as Prashastapada illustrates: 'It [universality] brings about the idea of its own form in one, two or many things; and it is the cause or basis of the notion of inclusion, inhering as it does in all its substrates simultaneously.'<sup>12</sup> The Nyaya philosophy further demonstrates the linguistic motivation for positing the reality of universals, as Gautama writes in the *Nyaya Sutra*: 'The meaning of a word (noun) is, according to us, the genus, form and individual. An individual is that which has a definite form and is the abode of particular qualities. The form is that which [indicates or] is called the token of the genus. The "universal" is the cause (or basis) of comprehensive cognition (2.2.66–9; 370).

The use of a word such as 'cow' refers to individual cows only because the universal 'cowhood' inheres in each cow. This reference theory of meaning grounds the reality of universals through the experience of particulars, which guarantees the true meaning of words.<sup>13</sup> The categories previously mentioned also partake of universality. Every substance possesses the universal 'being a substance', every quality 'being a quality', and every motion 'being a motion' (46).

The *vaisheshika* or the individualiser, is the category which enables members of the same kind to be numerically distinct things. This category is particularly important to the Vaisheshika in that it ensures that all non-composite substances, such as atoms, space, time, and selves, are all of the same type without being identical to each other. Not only does the individualiser ground the distinctness of similar things, but it likewise grounds the notions of similarity and resemblance. If one recognises that two or more particulars are members of the same class, one must presuppose the particularity of each individual

before one can compare them to establish their resemblance. The individualiser is also the basis of counting, and therefore numbers, as members of the same kind remain distinct and can be distinguished in the act of counting (47).

The category of *samavaya* or inherence is, according to Stephen Phillips, the most important of the categories. Inherence ensures the inseparable relation of one ontic category to another. Qualities and motions are related to substances by inherence. Universals and individualisers are attached to substances and their properties by inherence. The category of inherence allows for an explanation of why a given property or category inheres in a particular substance, perhaps at a given time, and not another. Qualities and motions also cannot in any way exist on their own, independent of substances. Inherence allows a means for qualities and motions to be bound to the substances which exhibit them.

As with the other categories, the Vaisheshika posit inherence as a distinct category, which indicates the practical, linguistic need to explain how it is that the other categories are related to each other. Whereas other categories are available to perception, or they 'bring about notions of' themselves, inherence must be inferred from the observation that categories like properties subsist in a necessary and dependent relation on substances. Prashastapada introduces the category of inherence as one which proceeds from the concept that 'this subsists in this', that one thing, namely some property, resides in an inseparable relation of dependence on another thing, namely a substance.<sup>14</sup> Inherence also explains how substances are related or combined with other substances. Composite substances consist of non-composite or other composite substances which are said to 'nest in' each other. It is through inherence that such nesting is possible. An organism can be said to nest in its organs,

organs nest in tissues, tissues nest in cells, and cells nest in atoms. Cells are combined with tissues, and tissues with organs, and so on, by means of inherence.<sup>15</sup>

A seventh and final category of the Vaiśeṣika ontology is *abhava* or absence, but which can be literally translated as ‘negative fact’. Absence is said to be real, but not present nor existent. Absences can be known and given name but are not present in objects. This category is supposed to provide a referent to make meaningful statements of negation. A denial would be a statement like any other which names something. The act of naming requires an object to be named, and absences provide such an object. If one does not see the delicious banquet of food one expected to encounter at the family reunion, this absence is named by the denial of the banquet, and perhaps a denial of any legitimacy for having come to such reunion. Absence is also a relational category, which allows the distinction between a point in time when an object is present, and when an object is no longer present, or after an object no longer exists at all. Mutual exclusion also entails absence, in that one object cannot be one and the same as a different object (50–1).

In positing their ontology, the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika philosophies seem to assume that the distinctness and reality of their categories is guaranteed by perception. From the position of Advaita Vedānta, it is vital to establish that the apparently distinct aspects of perceptual experience are in fact illusory. The philosopher Acharya Shankara explains in his commentary on the *Vedānta Sūtra* or *Brahma Sūtra*: ‘Although it is the object of this system to define the true meaning of the Vedānta texts and not, like the science of Logic, to establish or refute some tenet by mere ratiocination, still it is incumbent on thorough students of the Vedānta



Acharya Shankara Temple, Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir

to refute ... other systems which are obstacles in the way of perfect knowledge.’<sup>16</sup>

Acharya Shankara sets out to dismantle the realist position of Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika and each of the theoretical categories which support it. It is the proposed distinctness which stands as an obstacle in the way of the knowledge of Brahman. He emphasises an attempt to undermine the relational category of inherence. In the atomic theory of the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika, inherence serves the mereological function of explaining how atoms or other substances are bound together. The more important function of inherence is to explain how the various ontic categories are bound to each other. Inherence broadly serves a foundational role for this realist ontology, particularly for maintaining the distinctness of each ontic type indicated by the categories. Shankara argues against both functions served by inherence.

The Vaisheshika find the appearance of distinctness in the world and set out to explain it. Taking the world as a plurality of parts, the Vaisheshika analyse the world into imperceptible ultimate substances or atoms. The atoms comprise the material constitution and cause of the manifest world. As regards the atoms being the cause of the world, they must be conjoined in some way. Motion is required to bring the atoms into conjunction with one another. Acharya Shankara argues that motion requires the purposeful action of an agent to ensure the conjunction and organisation of the atoms. The non-intelligent atoms cannot themselves be the originators of the motion required for their own conjunction. The order of the manifest world could not arise from the mere conjunction of non-intelligent atoms. Brahman is the intelligent source of motion and the material cause of the world.<sup>17</sup>

Even if the Vedantin were to allow the existence of atoms, these atoms would not be fundamentally basic; such atoms would still be reducible and decomposable into the primary cause, which is Brahman. Acharya Shankara explains: 'Just as the hardness of ghee [butter], gold, and the like is destroyed in consequence of those substances being rendered liquid by their contact with fire, no separation of parts taking place all the while; so the solid shape of atoms may also be decomposed by their passing back into the indifferenced condition of the highest cause.'<sup>18</sup>

Acharya Shankara defeats the mereological function of inherence by inciting the problem of an infinite regress of inherence relations between atoms. He directly addresses the Vaisheshika and explains: 'For just as a binary compound, which is absolutely different from the two constituent atoms, is connected with them by means of the relation of inherence (*samavāya*), so the relation of inherence itself being absolutely different

from the two things which it connects, requires another relation of inherence to connect it with them, there being absolute difference in both cases. For this second relation of inherence again, a third relation of inherence would have to be assumed and so on *ad infinitum*' (2.2.13; 389).

The goal here is to establish that the atoms cannot be the ultimate causes of the world. By showing how positing inherence leads to an infinite regress of inferences, Acharya Shankara eliminates the explanatory power of the posited relation, arguing that it cannot suffice to explain how atoms are held together. If an infinite number of connections is required to explain how a single inherence relation relates two atoms, then there is no justifiable need for the Vaisheshika to posit a single relation of inherence. Inherence ultimately has no explanatory power and needs to be replaced by a stronger mereological theory. From the Advaita position, there are no mereological relations to explain. The world does not consist of atoms or any other parts at all.

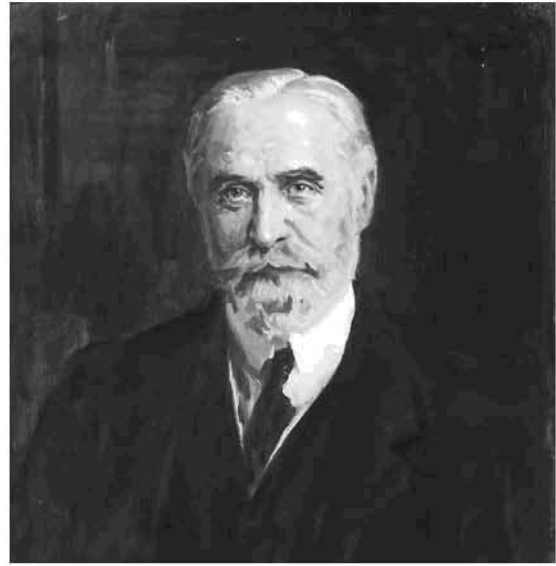
Consider how all the categories, those predicated of substances, for example, such as qualities, motions, universals, and individualisers, are entirely dependent upon substances and only found present in substances. The Vaisheshika posit these categories as all being completely distinct and separate from each other. It is the category of inherence which binds or predicates the other categories to others, such as qualities and motions to substances, or universals to substances and qualities.

Acharya Shankara argues that these two views about the categories, that they are both distinct from substances, and that they depend on substances, are contradictory. He explains that the categories, taken as distinct things, 'just as ordinary things, such as animals, grass, trees, and the like, being absolutely different from each other do not depend on each other, so the qualities, etc.

also being absolutely different from substance, cannot depend on the latter' (2.2.17; 395). Given that the categories like quality, motion, and universality are only present inhering and dependent upon substance, the Advaitin observes that only substance exists. Inherence would here not be needed to explain how distinct properties inhere in substances. Properties partake of the same being as their respective substances.

Another problem that arises from a theory which posits inherence as a separate real category, which relates properties, is a regress problem similar to the one above regarding atoms. In the same way that an infinite regress results from inherence relating the ultimate substances, if properties must be related to substances by means of inherence, nothing explains how inherence is related to properties or substances itself. The later Advaitin, Shriharsha (c. 1150), argues that for any attempt to posit an inherence, which relates a property to a property-bearer, there must be further relations of inherence to combine inherence with either term of the relation.<sup>19</sup> It is useless to posit a discrete relation of inherence to connect properties with their respective substances.

Yet another worry voiced by Shriharsha is the concern that property might be unrelated to the property-bearer (221). The nineteenth-century British idealist Francis Herbert Bradley (1846–1924) addresses a similar problem of a property being unrelated to a property-bearer as the consequence of the infinite regress of relations. Positing a relation of inherence does not explain how properties are related to substances. If an independent relation is ascribed to two terms, being independent, a further relation must be ascribed between the independent and each of the terms. From this, Bradley claims that the 'problem is not solved by taking relations as independently real. For, if so, the qualities and their relation fall entirely apart, and then we have



*Francis Herbert Bradley*

said nothing. Or we have to make a new relation between the old relation and the terms; which, when it is made, does not help us. It either itself demand a new relation.'<sup>20</sup>

Shriharsha and Bradley both further identify the only other option available: properties and property-bearing substances partake of the same being and are combined by the very nature of their unity. Bradley takes a similar position to the Advaitin's, arguing that reality is a unitary whole and that the world of distinct experiences is a mere appearance or illusion. Bradley takes the whole as serving the relational functions, as properties are 'all different, and on the other hand, because belonging to the one whole, are all forced to come together' (19). Shriharsha similarly explains that properties and substances in combination display an unified nature, for 'if at the beginning or the end the relation is admitted to be of the very nature of one of the terms (property or property-bearer), then since even the other term of the relation would enter into the very nature of that (the combined relate-relator), nothing but non-distinctness would result.'<sup>21</sup>





*Melpazhur Mana, Veliyanad, Kerala: Acharya Shankara's  
Mother Aryamba's House*

As I have stated above, the Vaisheshika system is motivated by realism regarding the referents of words. As Ruth Reyna explains, the 'Vaishe-shika thinkers, aware of the intimate relation between name and form, include in their categories all thinkable objects and not only those things predicable of another, but also subjects capable of having things predicated of them.'<sup>22</sup> Acharya Shankara recognised the relation between name and form as well, but argues against the Vaishe-shika for the opposing position. Distinctions of form found in experience, which are indicated by name, do not indicate true distinctions. Using clay as a metaphor, Acharya Shaṅkara demonstrates that, despite whatever form clay may be moulded into to make vases, bowls, ashtrays, and the like, all of these truly consist only of clay. Distinctions which apparently indicate an object's properties or what type of object it is, are only the products of naming.

The same is true with the nature of Brahman. All the effects and distinctions of the manifest world partake of the unitary existence with Brahman. Insomuch as they are distinct, named objects, they do not represent true reality.<sup>23</sup> From Shriharsha comes the same attack, charging that the realist categories are supposed to match realities which are ultimately illusory. Phenomenal experiences are not to be taken as ultimately real, but instead are distinguished and solidified in theory by practical and customary needs.<sup>24</sup>

For the Realist Vaisheshika, to distinguish distinct aspects of experience as ultimately real


gives rise to the need for identifying and explaining the relations between such distinct aspects. By observing things which are connected in some way, such as properties which are proximate to each other within an object, one infers such ideas as connection, relation, or inherence. According to the Vaisheshika, the need to utilise a word to indicate such a relation indicates that such a relation must actually exist independently. This enables the word to meaningfully refer to the relation.

Acharya Shankara clarifies that the experience of distinct things or properties entails some relations is apparent from experience. Relations like inherence are conceptual and linguistic in origin.<sup>25</sup> Inherence is just a useful way of referring to ways in which properties are configured in experience. Similarly, Bradley characterises the delineation of the world into qualities and relations in terms of mere practical necessity. To posit their actual existence becomes unintelligible upon analysis.<sup>26</sup> Considering the Vaishe-shika's categories, this mirrors the brunt of the Advaitin objection: the Vaisheshika take the mere qualitative aspects of experience to be the ingredients of the world. In doing so, they ultimately fail to account for how these ingredients are bound together.

Ultimately, for the Vaisheshika, the category of inherence helps establish and maintain within their ontological theory their belief in distinctness. Distinctness is the basis for their detailed model of categories and relations, which supposedly map onto the world. These categories however do not help delineate the real nature of the world. According to Shriharsha, the proof given for the actuality of distinctness, and thus the justification for the categories, is perception. Perception, however, does not prove distinctness, since distinctness is indeterminable from perception alone, as Shriharsha argues. The Advaitin

view, which regards the world as nothing other than the unitary existence of Brahman, does not deny that perception presents distinct properties, nor does it fail to endorse an asymmetrical relation between properties and substances. Even still, this view is compatible with the non-dual nature of Brahman.<sup>27</sup>

Taking the apparently distinct properties in experience as indicating real distinctions is a step the Advaitin does not take. For every objection made by the Advaitins to the category of inherence, we find that the Vaiśeṣika depend on the assumption that distinctness is real to establish that inherence relates what they wish to claim it does. Their goal, however, is to prove that distinctness is real. Inherence is supposed to explain how atoms are combined with one another. After all, inherence is supposed to explain how various qualities, motions, or universals are united with particular substances. Inherence is supposed to provide meaning for referring to relational aspects between properties.

Inherence is supposed to help prove and maintain the belief in distinctness. The Advaitins challenge that by positing inherence, the Vaiśeṣika grant one more unnecessary entity in an already excessive list of categories of existing types. By attacking the category of inherence, Advaitins like Acharya Shankara and Śrīharsha help weaken the threat that an ontological commitment to multiplicity and distinctness may pose to belief in a unified and fundamental reality. This threat is more than a mere difference in belief, but a difference about fundamental principles. Belief in multiplicity and distinctness pose a threat to the personal realisation of the reality and unity of Brahman and the ultimate liberation which this realisation affords. 

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# ***Advaita Vedanta and Philosophy of Religion***

**Javier Ruiz Calderón**

**T**HE ONLY WAY TO UNDERSTAND correctly any cultural product is to compare it with other members of the same class. That way, you can see what it has in common with them and what is specific, unique in it that distinguishes it from the others. The application of this general principle to the field of religious studies has given rise to the comparative study of religions. One of its founders, Max Müller, said in a well-known sentence: 'He who knows one [religion], knows none.'<sup>1</sup>

Among the sciences of religion that cannot avoid the use of the comparative method is the philosophy of religion. Philosophy is the attempt to describe the general structure of reality, theoretical philosophy, so that we can orient our life in it, practical philosophy. Theoretical philosophy always includes two parts: 1) description or analysis of the phenomenon to be studied and 2) exposition of the relations of that phenomenon with human life and the whole of reality. Consequently, the task of philosophy of religion consists in 1) describing the essence and forms of religious phenomena, the phenomenology of religion and 2) showing the relationships that religion has with human life and with reality as a whole, the critique of religion.

The aim of this article is to place Advaita

Vedanta within the descriptive and critical framework of the specific philosophy of religion in which I have been working in recent decades.<sup>2</sup> For this purpose I will summarise telegraphically some of the most important ideas of my philosophy of religion and will verify how they fit in with the tradition of Advaita Vedanta.<sup>3</sup>

## ***The Divine and Religious Attitude***

We must distinguish two facets of the religious phenomenon: the personal and the institutional. We may call them, respectively, 'religiosity' and 'religion'. Religiosity is a personal attitude towards life that includes the belief in one or more 'divine' realities. Religions are traditions—cultural, social, historical—of religiosity. Both aspects are inseparable: there is no personal religiosity without institutional religion or vice versa.

In Advaita Vedanta we find both aspects: the non-dualist tradition, which arises in the Upanishads, was institutionalised first in the lineage of teachers and disciples which transmitted it and then in the monastic order, whose foundation is attributed to Acharya Shankara.

Religious attitude, religiosity or spirituality is the heart of religion; but it needs to be expressed through external mediations such as beliefs, rules, institutions, symbols, rituals, and the like.

The knowledge of the Absolute, which is an immediate experience, is the essential aspect of Vedanta; but without the words, ideas, conventions, and the like, which accompany its transmission,

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it would remain as something merely subjective, mute, and without relevance to humanity.

Every religious tradition transmits an alleged experience or revelation of the Divine. The original experience that gives rise to Vedanta is the self-revelation of Brahman in the intellect of the knower.

In all religions, the Divine is conceived as something *transcendent* to ordinary experience; it is beyond the world, it is 'supernatural'. But we would not know anything about it if it did not reveal itself in the world, if it were not also immanent.

In Vedanta the idea of the Divine is Brahman, the Absolute, which is transcendent to the world and immanent in it.

Besides, the Divine is always conceived as that reality whose intervention is vital for the fulfilment of human needs, on which depends the good of human beings.

According to Vedanta, the knowledge of Brahman is what causes the annihilation of ignorance and suffering. And moksha is the ultimate goal of human existence.

From the religious point of view, 'worldliness' is the realm of finitude, desire, action, pleasure, and pain. The Divine is also believed to be beyond the world in this existential sense.

Brahman is eternally free. It has always been beyond the cycle of worldly existence, *samsara*.

The oldest forms of religion had a relative idea of Divine transcendence; the idea of an absolutely transcendent reality was reached later in the history of religion.

Vedic hymns worship a number of relative gods, deities who are partly dependent on worldly processes. Gradually, there was an evolution towards the idea of one Divine reality absolutely independent of the world. This idea only ended up prevailing in the Upanishads with the concept of Brahman, the Absolute.



Adi Shankara Keerthi Sthambha, Kalady, Kerala

Religious attitude consists in surrendering to the Divine, having the faith that it is the only reality that can assure us the attainment of what is good for us.

That self-surrender may be linked either to the worship of personal divine beings or to the contemplation of non-personal divine realities. In return, the Divine grants the humans the good to which they aspire.

In Vedanta, surrender to the Divine consists in the contemplation of Brahman or Self-enquiry, through the concrete steps of study, reflection, and meditation on the Absolute. The final knowledge of Brahman is the same as moksha.

The relationship between the human and the Divine is completely asymmetric: the initiation, development, and consummation of this relationship depend on the Divine reality. The role of human beings consists only in the assent, not merely theoretical but also vital, to that Divine offer.



Karl Jaspers (1883–1969)

Brahman reveals itself in the intellect in the form of discernment between the eternal and the transitory. The whole path of knowledge is nothing but the gradual deepening and assimilation of this discernment that is there from the beginning of the path.

### Forms of Religion

Older religions want the divinities to meet their worldly, relative needs; the subsequent ones aspire to 'salvation' or 'liberation', that is, they aspire to the final overcoming of finitude and the irreversible achievement of the supreme, absolute Good.

Vedic deities are relative beings and, therefore, can only provide relative goods. On the contrary, Brahman, the Absolute, can provide the absolute good, moksha.

Both levels of religion often go together, and the religion of salvation or liberation is usually based on the previous religiosity of worldly goods.

The practice of right action, dharma, purifies the mind. Only in a purified mind can the

knowledge of Brahman shine. These are the two levels of religiosity in Vedanta.

Religiosity of salvation or liberation started in what Karl Jaspers called the 'Axial Age' of the history of humankind, in which individuals of some advanced cultures started to live as autonomous beings and raised philosophical questions.

In India this happened at the time of the Vedic Upanishads, which are the foundations of Vedanta.

Religiosity of worldly goods belongs to and unites the individual exclusively with the specific community to which she or he belongs; religiosity of salvation or liberation is universal, open to all humanity.

The dharma shastras, treatises on right action, like the *Manu Smriti*, explain the duties of each person according to the social group to which they belong, their gender, and their age. For the most orthodox ones, only male individuals of the three upper castes were entitled to practise Vedanta. Contemporary Vedanta, supported by the authority of many traditional texts, states that all human beings are called to the search for spiritual liberation.

Religiosity of worldly goods is static: it provides psychological and social order and safety; that of salvation or liberation is dynamic: it transforms people and directs them towards holiness.

The practice of dharma provides that psychosocial order, which is the first function of religion; the practice of Vedanta, or any yoga or any spiritual path, leads to moksha.

Among the religions of salvation or liberation some are more 'prophetic', centred on the transformation of history, which is conceived linearly; others more 'mystical', aspiring to the transcendence of time, that is conceived as cyclic.

In this classification, all religions born in India, also called 'dharma religions', are considered mystical religions, together with Daoism.

### Concepts of the Divine

There are different concepts of the Divine. They can be either 1) unitary or multiple; 2) personal or impersonal; 3) entitative or potential; 4) of worldly goods or of salvation or liberation; and, among the latter, 5) prophetic or mystical. Combining these five factors, result many different possible concepts of the divine, such as monotheism, polytheism, monism, animism, and so on.

For Vedanta, the Divine is *nirguna* Brahman, the Absolute without relative to the world attributes. Brahman is *akhandā sat-chid-ananda*, the indivisible Reality-Consciousness-Bliss, the only Existence. This is a unitary, impersonal, entitative, liberating, and mystical idea of the Divine. The world does not exist apart from Brahman. But when we think of the world as something really existing, emerges a lower idea of Brahman as a personal God, *ishvara*, or an Absolute with relative to the world attributes, *saguna* Brahman. In this relative sense, Brahman is the ruler of the universe, who governs, creates, maintains and destroys it, distributes the fruits of actions, and the like. The worship of Brahman with attributes concentrates the mind and facilitates the emergence of the knowledge of the attributeless Brahman.

### Eschatology and Spirituality

Many religious traditions have beliefs about a possible survival of a person after death, which help them to explain the meaning of the apparent injustices of human life.

Indian religions believe in the law of karma, the actions we perform determine the future circumstances in which we will find ourselves; reciprocally, everything that happens to us is due to our past actions. The individual soul is born again and again in circumstances corresponding to the actions it has performed previously.

Some religions of salvation or liberation

believe that the supreme good can only be obtained after death; for others, it is possible to achieve it in this life. But all of them offer as the ideal goal for this life 'holiness' or religious perfection, that is, a maximum of or even a complete surrender to the Divine.

For Vedanta, it is possible to achieve liberation in life, before the death of the physical body. The liberated in life is one who has assimilated completely the knowledge of the identity of one's self with Brahman. When such a person's body dies, she or he will never be reborn again.

The full surrender of the Self-realised person to the Divine frees one from attachment to worldly things. This allows such a person to overcome selfishness, empathise with other beings and live altruistically, loving and serving others.

One who has been liberated in life has overcome ignorance, attachment, and pleasure or pain. Such a person perceives the unity of all things in the Atman and, consequently, spontaneously loves all beings and, depending on one's character, either serves them actively or simply radiates one's wisdom and love without seemingly doing anything, like the sun.

There are various spiritual paths which lead to holiness. Prayer, meditation, and other complementary practices, moral, ascetic, and the like, allow the spiritual aspirant to increase one's awareness of and surrender to the Divine. In many traditions, faith, based on trust in the testimony of others, is transformed gradually into a direct experience of the Divine, that is, into mysticism, whose higher degree is the continuous and spontaneous awareness of the Divine.

The essential practices of Advaita Vedanta are: listening of teachings on Atman-Brahman, reflection on such teachings, and deep meditation on what has been understood in the previous stages, with the purpose of fully assimilating it. Finally, the knower only

perceives Brahman, directly, spontaneously, and continuously.

### **Metaphysical Critique of Religion**

Most religious traditions affirm the existence of entities that are transcendent to the world: divine beings, souls, heavens and hells, a postmortem life, and so on. What can we know about them? Subjective experience of the supernatural is not valid as a common form of knowledge. Science and philosophy cannot say anything about the transcendent, since they do not reach beyond the mundane realm. All religiosity incorporates an element of faith in the testimony of a tradition that conveys a religious experience. Faith based on the testimony of certain scriptures and traditions is reasonable or plausible when it does not contradict common experience and reasoning.

As we have seen above, Vedanta asserts the existence, at least relative, of the individual soul, which is immersed in the cycle of births and deaths ruled by the law of karma, and in the possibility of its liberation through the knowledge of Brahman. It also asserts, here from the highest point of view, the existence of the Atman-Brahman as the Absolute and non-dual reality.

According to Vedanta, neither perception nor reasoning can say anything about metaphysical or transcendent realities such as the soul and its destiny, Brahman, and the like. Only the particular verbal testimony that we find in the revealed scriptures, the Vedas, allows us to know those realities. Therefore, Vedanta begins, like every religious tradition, by faith in revelation; and this indirect knowledge is transformed into direct knowledge and mystical experience by Vedantic practice. These Vedanta doctrines are plausible, for they do not contradict perception and reasoning, that is, they are compatible with science and ordinary knowledge.

The three kinds of world views that may seem plausible in the twenty-first century are naturalism, only the material universe exists; monotheism, there is a personal God who is the foundation and Lord of the universe; and monism, there is an absolute non-personal reality that is the foundation of the universe; but it is not possible to justify either the truth or the falsehood of any of them.

Advaita Vedanta would be classified within the 'monisms'; but the term 'non-dualism,' *advaita*, is more accurate, because nothing can be said about Brahman, not even that it is 'one,' since, being beyond all dualities, it is out of the scope of speech and thought. Literally, we can only say about Brahman what it is not: it is *neti, neti*, not this, not this; nothing of all this: it is not finite, it is in-finite, *an-anta*; it is in-divisible, *a-khanda*; it is time-less, *nitya*; there are no dualities in it and so, it is non-dual, *a-dvaita*.

According to our agnostic philosophy of religion, nothing can be asserted or denied about the truth or falseness of the metaphysics of Vedanta.

The form of religiosity that is most consistent with this metaphysical agnosticism is a religiosity without metaphysical beliefs in supermundane entities, processes, and the like. But, can there be religion without metaphysical beliefs? Yes. For there to be a religion, there must be faith in the Divine, that is, in a transcendent and benefactor principle. But that transcendence need not be an entity located beyond the world; it is enough to believe in the possibility of a subjective, existential, transcendence of worldly limitations; that is, in the possibility of religious perfection or holiness.

How to apply this to Vedanta? Is the practice of Vedanta possible without literally believing in karma and rebirth and, what is more serious, without believing in the existence of Brahman? We



think so. It seems to us that for practising Vedanta, it is enough to believe in the possibility of liberation and that it can be reached through study, reflection, and meditation on Brahman. For such practice, even if one understands Brahman not as a metaphysical reality, but merely as a symbol or fiction expedient for spiritual practice—or, as Buddhists would say, as a ‘skillful means’, *upaya*, practical, although not literally true—one eventually would realise one’s identity with Brahman.<sup>4</sup>

### **Ethical Critique of Religion**

Someone who believes that religion is true, will believe as well in its goodness; someone who believes it is false, will think it is not good; and there is no more possible rational debate. But at least it will seem reasonable that, if there is religion, it should be up to the times, that is: it should be consistent with the philosophical and scientific rationality and with the humanistic and universalist values that emerged in the ‘axial age’ of the history of humanity and in Western modernity. We must combine faith with reason by taking the best of each side. And, consequently, we must abandon so many enslaving irrationalities, injustices, superstitions, and the like, that religious traditions have been dragging for millennia. The present-day religion must be integral: it must surrender to the Divine but without rejecting the world. The holiness sought should not be an escape from the world but a full life in the world.

Advaita Vedanta is consistent both with scientific and philosophical rationality and with modern humanism and universalism. It is true that in its most orthodox versions it has been linked to inequalities of caste, gender, and the like, and with the consequent social injustices; but some traditional texts, from the Upanishads and the Bhagavadgita onwards, already asserted the essential equality of all human beings. And contemporary Vedanta, which arose from Sri



*Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama, Kalyani*

Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda and now is followed by many Hindu spiritual masters, asserts firmly the equality of all human beings and combines the great spiritual tradition of Vedanta with modern rationality, taking the best of both and abandoning what is incompatible.

### **For A Critical Religiosity**

In this last section, we shall not write philosophically, from mere reason, but religiously, from faith in the Divine; but from a critical faith, enlightened and without metaphysical beliefs. For a critical religiosity, the Divine cannot still be a hypothetical supermundane reality, but a name for the experience of self-transcendence in the world, that is, of holiness. The other ideas of the Divine are symbols of that potential for religious perfection that we all have.

For the interpretation that I defend of Advaita Vedanta, Brahman is the idea, the symbol and the supreme experience that guides and culminates the spiritual practice, although its existence as a real entity cannot be asserted.

The same goes for the other metaphysical, eschatological, and other beliefs of religious traditions: they are useful fictions for religious practice. It is not necessary to throw overboard religious traditions and their enormous wealth of institutions, stories, ideas, and pragmatically useful practices. They will have to be reinterpreted





In Sharada Devi Temple, Shringeri

by adapting everything that is necessary to modern rationality, but being careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

The doctrines of karma, rebirth, the individual soul, and so on, may be kept as metaphors or expedients useful for motivating, articulating, and guiding the religious practice.

On the other hand, critical religiosity must have, in addition to the individual dimension, a social dimension: the struggle for individual holiness must be inseparably linked with the struggle for the common good and social justice.

The necessary social dimension of spiritual practice is already clear from the Gita. But this has come to the fore in contemporary Vedanta, according to which the best way to worship God is to serve God in suffering beings. For that reason, in many of the ashramas and monasteries that follow this version of Vedanta, in addition to the temple and the study room there is also a charity hospital, free schools, and the like, in which monks and devotees can both serve others and purify themselves so that the knowledge of Brahman can dawn in them.

From this critical religiosity, there is not only one true religion, but many true religious traditions in the pragmatic sense that they can lead humans to holiness. For each one, her or his own tradition and the symbols it includes are the best; but one must not think dogmatically that what is best for me is best for everyone. In fact, we should not only tolerate other traditions but we should be open to learning from them.

In this respect, Hinduism has been a pioneering tradition. Sri Ramakrishna experienced in himself that the different ideas of the Divine are different names for the same experience and that all spiritual paths lead to the same goal. And Swami Vivekananda proclaimed this message to the world, boldly stating in the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions held at Chicago that all religions are true. I believe that this humanistic and universalist neo-Hinduism or neo-Vedanta has become, despite the opposition of the more conservative, orthodox, and dogmatic sections of Hinduism, the most pluralistic, dialogic, and open religious tradition, and fortunately this attitude is also gradually entering into other religions.

Deep down, the Divine is a mystery of which almost nothing can be said. This reflection must culminate in silence. But not in an empty silence, but in that of a Plenitude that transcends all limits, concepts, and words.

That is why Dakshinamurti, the prototypical master, symbol of Brahman, teaches silently. Only when the ignorant mind is silenced and absorbed in the contemplation of the Absolute, the non-dual experience dawns and the individual merges into pure Consciousness, the love without subject and object.



## Notes and References

1. Max Müller, 'The Science of Religion: Lecture One', *The Essential Max Müller On Language, Mythology, and Religion*, ed. Jon R Stone (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 113.
2. I summarise it in my recent book *La Entrega a lo Divino: Esbozo de una Filosofía de la Religión* [Surrender to the Divine: Outline of a Philosophy of Religion] (Madrid: Herder, 2019).
3. From now on, when I use the term 'Vedanta' without qualification, I will always be referring specifically to Advaita Vedanta.
4. On this pragmatist reinterpretation of Advaita Vedanta, see Javier Ruiz Calderón, 'Advaita Vedānta Without Transcendent Metaphysics', *Indologica Taurinensia*, 41-2 (2015-16), 7-17.

# Revisiting Acharya Shankara on Renunciation—A Fundamental Reversal

Roger Marcaurelle

RENUNCIATION PLAYS A CRUCIAL ROLE in Acharya Shankara's teachings and in the Advaita Vedanta tradition which traces back to him. A close analysis of Acharya Shankara's writings shows however that a major misinterpretation of his teaching concerning renunciation has occurred within his own tradition and among modern scholars. This misinterpretation holds that, according to Shankara, physical or monastic renunciation was a *sine qua non* for full Self-knowledge and *moksha*. But this erroneous understanding of the founder of the Advaita tradition superimposes a significant limitation to the path, *sadhana*, proposed by him for people who wish to reach the full experience of Advaita. This clarification of Acharya Shankara's philosophy of renunciation was developed in full-length in my book *Freedom Through Inner Renunciation*.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I propose first to recall my main arguments and then to make use of this reinterpretation for a consistent understanding of Acharya Shankara's introduction to his commentary on the *Aitareya Upanishad*, which deals mainly with renunciation.

## Physical renunciation Viewed as A Sine Qua Non

The viewpoint that physical renunciation and the

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monastic way of living represent a *sine qua non* for complete Self-knowledge and liberation is expressed quite radically by the late Chandrashekhara Bharati, who was the pontiff of the Shringeri Matha, one of the seats of spiritual learning founded by Acharya Shankara himself. First, following Acharya Shankara, Chandrashekhara Bharati states in his commentary on the *Vivekachudamani* that *brahmanas* alone have access to physical renunciation of rites and to the monastic life which follows. But, still presenting his point of view as Acharya Shankara's, and referring to all other possible aspirants, Chandrashekhara Bharati adds: 'As they are disqualified for *samnyasa*, which alone invests one with the right for Vedantic inquiry, in their present life itself, they cannot know and realize Brahman.'<sup>2</sup>

Thus, for this modern representative of Acharya Shankara's tradition, monasticism is undoubtedly a *sine qua non* for liberation. Following a field research on the Shringeri Matha, Yoshitsugu Saway comes to a similar conclusion: 'For Shankara, *moksha* [liberation] is not possible without *jnana* [Self-knowledge], and the road *par excellence* to *jnana* is *karma-samnyasa*. This *samnyasa*, in turn, is possible only for *brahmanas*. It was they for whom Shankara's instruction was intended.'<sup>3</sup> Sengaku Mayeda writes along the same lines that 'Shankara's teachings were meant only for selected *samnyasins*'.<sup>4</sup> Patrick Olivelle goes so far as to declare that 'by limiting renunciation to Brahmins, Shankara

has in effect restricted enlightenment and even the aspiration to enlightenment to Brahmins'.<sup>5</sup>

According to this interpretation of Acharya Shankara's works, any aspirant to liberation must become a physical renunciant immediately after studies or must go through the following steps in the course of either one or many lives: the yoga of action, that is, performance of regular and occasional rites without attachment to their rewards; purity of mind brought about by the yoga of action and giving rise to the intellectual conviction that the means to moksha is not ritual action, but direct knowledge of the actionless Self; physical renunciation of all rites as part of initiation into monastic life; full-time practice of the discipline of knowledge consisting of hearing, reflection, and meditation, applied mainly to the Upanishadic literature.

In other words, as summarised by Kalyanasundara Sastri, 'one has to practice *karma-yoga* for the purpose of attaining the purification of the mind. This is the preliminary discipline, the ground work for spiritual progress. After attaining the purification of the mind, and after renouncing all *karma*, one treads the path of knowledge.'<sup>6</sup>

This interpretation of the necessary steps to moksha seems to contradict many passages of Hindu literature which suggest that people have reached moksha without taking recourse to physical renunciation. One may recall, for instance, King Janaka referred to in the Bhagavad-gita and other non-sannyasins, who are said in the Upanishads to teach the knowledge of the Self from father to son.<sup>7</sup>

### **Absence of Renunciation as an Exception**

In the context of the tradition of Advaita Vedanta, two explanations are often given to solve the apparent contradiction between the Upanishadic prescription of physical renunciation as a means of Self-knowledge and Acharya

Shankara's acknowledgement of attainment of Self-knowledge without being a physical renouncer. The first explanation is that attainment of Self-knowledge and moksha without physical renunciation is an exception; the second is that one must have taken physical renunciation in a previous life.

In her book *Tilak and Shankara on the Gita*, G V Saroja writes for instance: 'This is the reason for Shankara's repeated emphasis of *jnana* [knowledge] preceded by *samnyasa* as the only means to realization. Exceptional cases like Janaka can never be considered as the general case.'<sup>8</sup> But this explanation has no scriptural or even logical basis. First, it must be noted that neither the Upanishads, nor the Gita, nor Acharya Shankara say that Janaka's process of enlightenment, for instance, is to be taken as an exception. Second, Saroja should have identified the scriptural rule with respect to which Janaka's case is to be considered an exception. She has not.

The fundamental flaw in the exception argument is this: given that from Acharya Shankara's viewpoint, the prescription of physical renunciation as a subsidiary for Self-knowledge is addressed to the brahmanas only, non-brahmanas such as King Janaka cannot be exceptions to an injunction that does not even apply to them in the first place. Thus, for non-brahmanas, the exception argument explains nothing at all. Theoretically, it could be relevant only for brahmanas. At least one thing is sure at this point: the exception argument provides no consistent explanation for all cases of enlightenment without physical renunciation.

### **The Postulation of Renunciation in A Previous Life**

Other commentators of Acharya Shankara have tried to solve the apparent contradiction of achieving liberation without the subsidiary of

physical renunciation, by assuming that it has been resorted to in a previous life. This argument is found as early as Sarvajnatman (c. eighth-ninth century), who may have been an immediate disciple of Acharya Shankara.

According to Purva Mimamsa, rituals enjoined by the scriptures generate an unseen potency, *apurva*, which continues to operate after the performance of the ritual in order to bring about the reward of the latter, heaven for instance. Sarvajnatman understands the unseen potency generated by physical renunciation to be necessary for achieving the result consisting of liberation.<sup>9</sup> His viewpoint is well summarised by Appayya Dikshita in *Siddhanta-lesha-sangraha*:

Since the sins that obstruct the rise of knowledge are infinite, some are removable by the practice of sacrifice and the like, some are removable by the unseen potency [*apurva*] from renunciation. ... And thus, for those householders, who practice hearing, and so on, in the intervals of karma, there is attainment of knowledge, not in this life, but only after attaining renunciation, in another life. As for those like Janaka and others, who attain knowledge, even while being householders, their attainment of knowledge is due to renunciation in a prior life.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, through unseen potency and unseen lives, prominent post-Shankara Advaitins have constructed a rationale for physical renunciation as a *sine qua non* of Self-knowledge.

Let us first observe that, from a logical viewpoint, the need of an unseen potency from renunciation in a previous life would arise only with respect to brahmanas. Since, according to Acharya Shankara, no prescription of physical renunciation is ever addressed to a non-brahmana in a given life, there is no need to justify a non-brahmana's enlightenment without physical renunciation during that life, by one's renunciation in a previous one. Therefore, the unseen



Appayya Dikshita and A Disciple

potency argument cannot claim to support physical renunciation as a *sine qua non* for all cases of enlightenment.

Let us now evaluate the argument of the previous-life renunciation as a possible solution in the case of brahmanas attaining liberation without physical renunciation. First of all, Acharya Shankara does not even accept the concept of unseen potency. 'And there is no valid proof of its existence', says he in his commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*.<sup>11</sup> Second, when he refers to the effect of practices in previous lives leading to enlightenment in a future one, he never talks of the production of unseen potency but only of the purification of the mind.<sup>12</sup>

It may be argued that the means of knowledge known as postulation, *arthapatti*, allows one to infer renunciation in previous lives because of its absence in the one where enlightenment has been reached. Postulation is assuming the existence of a fact or principle in order to explain an *undeniable fact*, which otherwise cannot be accounted for. A stock example of postulation goes as follows: 'Devadatta is fat. But he does not eat during the day. So it must be assumed that he eats at night.' Most important to note here is that the first two statements, before the conclusive

postulation as such, are understood to be visible, undeniable facts.

Now, here is how one would construe the postulation of renunciation in a previous life: 'Physical renunciation is necessary for enlightenment. But some people attain enlightenment in a given life without physical renunciation. So, it must be assumed that they took up physical renunciation in a previous life.' One cannot but notice here that the first statement is not an undeniable fact or injunction. It is simply an unproven statement. Thus, the assumption of physical renunciation in a previous life is not even formally acceptable as a postulation. Rather, it amounts to a circular argument.

Even if it were possible to properly construe a postulation in favour of physical renunciation in a previous life, it would not be valid from Acharya Shankara's viewpoint since, contrary to later Advaitins, he does not use and even accept postulation as a valid means of knowledge. Unconvinced by an opponent's recourse to postulation, Acharya Shankara retorts in his commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*: 'But this is not logical. This queer assumption of something unknown is sheer dogmatism.'<sup>13</sup> He also points out in his commentaries on the *Brahma Sutra* and the Gita that when something is known from scriptures, postulation can have no claim.

### **Understanding Renunciation in Acharya Shankara's Own Terms**

If we wish to understand in Acharya Shankara's own terms the relationship between prescription of physical renunciation as a subsidiary and acquisition of direct Self-knowledge, we have to use something other than postulation or unseen potency.

The possibility that a brahmana attains enlightenment without physical renunciation can be accounted for without violating Acharya

Shankara's hermeneutics from a rule provided by *Purva Mimamsa Sutra*: '[Opponent:] The act should be undertaken (*pravrittih syat*) only when the performer has the capacity to perform all [the accessory details]; as the act has been laid down as such. [Reply:] No. There should be performance (*pravritti*) even if only part [of the accessory details] can be performed. For the fulfilment of the purpose (*arthanivritti*) proceeds from the principal action. All the rest is [simply not essential], because it subserves the purpose of the act.'<sup>14</sup>

Applying this rule to physical renunciation as a subsidiary for Self-knowledge, we could say that if, as an exception, a brahmana cannot take to physical renunciation, one can still fully actualise Self-knowledge, the main means, corresponding to the 'principal action', and obtain liberation, its 'purpose', because the latter does accrue mainly from Self-knowledge. Being indirect means, other factors are 'simply not essential'.

We may also take recourse to the manner in which Acharya Shankara explains the fact that people are reported to reach Self-knowledge and liberation without having practised the rites prescribed as remote subsidiaries for the discipline of knowledge. According to Acharya Shankara's interpretation of the *Brahma Sutra*, the claim that people are qualified for Self-knowledge even when deprived of qualification for rites is explained by the fact that Shrauta and Smarta texts provide indicatory marks, *linga*, suggesting that, even though unqualified for rites and thus not practising them, some people, among whom were the widower Raikva and women such as Gargi, did acquire immediate knowledge of the Self.<sup>15</sup> Applying the same exegetical rule to the subsidiary consisting of physical renunciation, we may infer from indicatory marks found in Upanishadic passages referring to brahmana householders, that they are said to reach mediate as well as

immediate Self-knowledge without fulfilling the auxiliary requirement of physical renunciation.

But this does not render the prescription of physical renunciation useless or unimportant. Its value is again analogous to that of the prescription of rites even when Self-knowledge is accessible without them. According to Acharya Shankara's understanding of the *Brahma Sutra*, even when Self-knowledge and moksha are available without rites, it is preferable for people of the first three modes of living, student, householder, and hermit, to carry on with their ritualistic duties (3.4.39). It can be said in a similar fashion that even if direct Selfknowledge is available for brahmanas without physical renunciation, it is preferable for them to adopt the latter. This exegetical principle explains quite simply why Acharya Shankara can, on the one hand, very naturally accept that brahmanas are qualified for the discipline of knowledge even without taking to physical renunciation, and, on the other hand, strongly advocate the latter for them. Arguing in favour of physical renunciation as a *sine qua non* by taking recourse to assumption, hypothetical lives and unseen potency clearly turns out to be out of place in the context of Acharya Shankara's hermeneutics.

### **Renunciation of All Actions in the Householder's Path Towards Moksha**

One may still argue that, in a few places in his commentary on the Gita, Acharya Shankara does prescribe physical renunciation as a necessary step on the path to Self-knowledge and liberation. Let us examine one of these passages that constitute quite complete summaries of the whole path to liberation. In his commentary on the fifth chapter of the Gita, Acharya Shankara gives the following sequence:<sup>16</sup> yoga of action, karma yoga; purity of mind, *sattvashuddhi*; attainment of knowledge, *jnana-prapti*;



Elephanta Caves, 8th Century, Colossal Head

renunciation of all actions, *sarva-karma-sannyasa*; steadfastness in the right perception, *sa-myag-darshana-nishtha*; and moksha.

It is usually understood by commentators that, in these summaries of the path to liberation, 'attainment of knowledge' does not refer to direct Selfknowledge. It means a deep intellectual conviction, arising usually from both the purity of the mind and the study of the scriptures that the ultimate goal of life is liberation from all limited and impermanent states, including sojourn in heaven and that the means of this liberation is not action or its combination with Self-knowledge, but immediate knowledge of the actionless Self alone. This conviction inspires the seeker to take up physical abandonment of rites, *sarva-karma-sannyasa*, which is considered to be a necessary condition for entry into the Advaita discipline of knowledge, 'steadfastness



in the right perception.' However, this interpretation contradicts Acharya Shankara's viewpoint.

Let us first contextualise the sequence of the relevant verse of Gita in more detail.<sup>17</sup> When presenting this outline, Acharya Shankara specifies that 'on every occasion,' *pade pade*, Sri Krishna has mentioned and will be mentioning this sequence. Thus, this summary of the spiritual path seems quite basic in Acharya Shankara's eyes. Yet, before giving the sequence, he mentions another possible way of attaining moksha: 'It has been said that the renouncers who are steadfast in the right perception obtain moksha directly, *sadyomukti*.'<sup>18</sup>

This statement seems to account for those who adopt physical renunciation immediately after their studies, that is, 'even before starting with rites' (4.21). These physical renouncers are contrasted with people who 'started with rites' (4.20), that is, who married after their studies and became householders. It is as an alternative to the direct way of physical renouncers that the sequence given immediately after also leads to liberation, but 'through stages,' *kramena*. Thus, according to Acharya Shankara, the sequence of the relevant verse of the Gita accounts for the moksha of all people, who did not take up physical renunciation immediately after studies. We will call it the 'householder's sequence toward moksha.'

One could argue that, in this sequence, renunciation of all actions, *sarva-karma-sannyasa*, does mean physical renunciation and since only brahmanas are allowed to adopt it, these stages are addressed only to them. But we will now see that 'renunciation of all actions, *sarva-karma-sannyasa* or *karma-sannyasa*, is *also* attributed by Acharya Shankara to nonbrahmanas, although not in the sense of physical renunciation as a prerequisite for the discipline of knowledge.

When, in his commentary on the fourth chapter of the Gita, Acharya Shankara describes

what happens with actions after enlightenment, he refers to two possible cases, that is, that of the person who did not renounce physically and that of the one who did: '*The person*, the one possessing the perception described in the previous verse, *whose undertakings*—they are called undertakings because all actions are undertaken—actions undertaken, *are all*, as many as they are, *devoid of desires and of their incentives*, of desires and of their causes, [and] accomplished without purpose, as mere movements, for the guidance of people if one leads an active life, and for the bare maintenance of life, if one abstains from active life' (4.19).

Since Acharya Shankara acknowledges here the possibility that one continues rites after attaining liberation-in-life, in his eyes, at least some people followed the discipline of knowledge and even attained direct Self-knowledge without physical renunciation, that is, without the physical 'renunciation of all actions' of the above householder's sequence as usually understood by Acharya Shankara's interpreters. And we saw that, if we want to remain consistent with Acharya Shankara's own position, neither the notion of exception nor the postulation of physical renunciation in a previous life can justify physical renunciation as a universal requirement. Then the questions are: What people does the sequence proposed by the above summary really account for? And what is the meaning of 'renunciation of all actions,' *sarva-karma-sannyasa*, and of the other steps in the sequence?

The most significant clue is found in the various passages, where Acharya Shankara accounts for people who attained enlightenment without physical renunciation and who continued the performance of rites even after that. As he says in his commentary on the second chapter of the Gita: 'Now, as for the person who, [after] engaging in actions out of ignorance or

out of imperfections such as desire, had his mind purified by sacrifices, gifts, or austerity, and in whom arose knowledge of the supreme truth that all this is simply the One, the Brahman, the non-doer, what may appear, even after action and its motive have disappeared, as one's involvement in action for the guidance of people and with the same assiduity as before, is no action' (2.11).

A little further, explaining the verse which says that King Janaka and others attained liberation through action alone, Acharya Shankara adds that, even though these enlightened persons did not renounce physically at any point in time, they did reach a stage which he calls 'renunciation of actions': 'If, even though knowers of Reality, Janaka and others of old were engaged in actions, they did so for the guidance of people. They attained perfection only through the knowledge that "the gunas act upon the gunas". The idea is that, even though [the stage of] renunciation of actions had been reached, *karma-sannyase prapte'pi*, they attained perfection through action alone, that is, they did not renounce rites [physically]' (3.20).

What then is the meaning of 'renunciation of actions', *karma-sannyasa*, here? All of the three quotations above describe enlightened people who have direct Self-knowledge and are beyond the realm of the gunas and activity. In other words, they are liberated in this very life. Because they have attained direct Self-knowledge and reached the ultimate spiritual goal, all prescribed actions have certainly served their purpose. Therefore, the meaning of Acharya Shankara's comment is that these liberated people were no doubt justified in renouncing these prescribed actions physically, but they did not, for the sake of providing an exemplary behaviour to people around them. It also follows that the level of renunciation of actions, *karma-sannyasa*, which they are said to have attained, must refer to the

possibility of physical renunciation *after* reaching a Self-knowledge that is already direct in nature.

Acharya Shankara comes back with a similar description in his introduction to a verse in the fourth chapter of the Gita: 'On the other hand, one having started with action and having gained the right perception of the Self later on, surely abandons actions along with their accessories, as one does not see any purpose in action. If for some reason it is impossible to abandon actions, one remains involved in actions as before, in order to guide people, without attachment to action and its rewards, as one has no purpose of one's own. Yet one does nothing at all, because, being burnt by the fire of knowledge, one's action turns out to be inaction' (4.20).

Again the idea conveyed by Acharya Shankara is that the most logical behaviour after enlightenment is to abandon rites physically. And even when this is impossible, absence of doership, 'one does nothing at all', is maintained by the enlightened person. This suggests that absence of doership or the renunciation of doership is already achieved along with direct Self-knowledge when the stage of physical renunciation referred to in this context is attained.

Thus in the householder sequence towards moksha, 'renunciation of all actions', *sarva-karma-sannyasa*, would refer to physical renunciation of prescribed actions *not before* enlightenment, as is usually interpreted, but *after* it has been attained. And the stage of 'attainment of knowledge' would not refer to a mediate knowledge or conviction about the Self, but to a Self-knowledge that is already immediate and experiential.

A first observation on this hypothesis concerning the householder's sequence is that the meaning it gives to 'renunciation of all actions' and 'attainment of knowledge' in the householder's sequence is much more consistent with



Acharya Shankara's basic doctrinal position. Indeed, when we understand that, in this sequence, 'renunciation of all actions' means physical renunciation *after* enlightenment, the three inconsistencies raised by the usual interpretation of the sequence simply disappear.

First, inasmuch as, in the sequence, physical renunciation is done *after* enlightenment, mediate and immediate Self-knowledge have necessarily been gained *before* physical renunciation, which avoids the inconsistency of making the latter a universal necessary step before mediate or immediate Self-knowledge. Second, since direct Self-knowledge is present even before physical renunciation, it follows that moksha is attainable while not being a physical renunciant. Third, since the physical renunciation of this sequence pertains to the person who is already enlightened, since the latter is beyond the scope of prescriptions, it is fair to assume that enlightened non-brahmanas also could physically renounce without violating the prescription of renunciation as a means of Self-knowledge for the unenlightened brahmanas alone. Thus, according to our interpretation, the householder's sequence has a universal application with respect to cases of moksha without prior physical renunciation.

Yet the following objection could be raised: If, in this sequence, 'attainment of knowledge' is already immediate in nature, then 'steadfastness in the right perception', which follows renunciation of all actions and which is the last level before moksha, becomes redundant. Our reply is that although in both 'attainment of knowledge' and 'steadfastness in the right perception', the said knowledge is direct and experiential, 'steadfastness in the right perception' is meant to emphasise that the means of moksha is steadiness in direct Self-knowledge alone, rather than any kind of 'steadfastness in action' comprising

rites alone or their combination with meditation. It equally points out that even those who could stop the physical performance of rites after attaining direct Self-knowledge, and who, however, choose to continue with it, are also devoid of all activity in their experience of the transcendental Self and therefore liberated through Self-knowledge alone.

### **Clarifying Acharya Shankara's Introduction to the Aitareya Upanishad**

Acharya Shankara's introduction to his commentary on the *Aitareya Upanishad* is one of the passages of his works where he can easily appear to promote physical and monastic renunciation as a universal requirement for the purpose of moksha and even following moksha.<sup>19</sup>

The context is crucial in understanding Acharya Shankara's stand here. The context is the opponent whom Acharya Shankara brings up for argument's sake in his commentary. From the very start of the introduction, the opponent tries to prove that the means of enlightenment is the uninterrupted combination of ritual actions and Self-knowledge, which here essentially means meditation, and that there is no such thing as a scriptural prescription of the abandonment of ritual actions, a prescription that would contradict the necessity of the combination of rituals and Self-knowledge.

In brief, Acharya Shankara's reply to the opponent is that: the means of liberation is direct experiential Self-knowledge alone and this knowledge is devoid of any action, even meditative activity, being one with the actionless Brahman; the scripture's prescription of physical renunciation for Self-knowledge in the case of the unenlightened person is proof that the ritual-knowledge combination for life is not necessary for enlightenment; the mention of physical renunciation of ritual actions in the case

of the enlightened person is not a prescription but a kind of confirmation of a natural tendency following from the realisation that ritual actions serve no further purpose.

### **Renunciation of the Enlightened Person**

Let's first examine Acharya Shankara's viewpoint on renunciation of the enlightened person in his introduction to his commentary on the *Aitareya Upanishad*. In the course of his demonstration, Acharya Shankara defines domestic life as induced by desire. From this perspective, domestic life is first of all a state of consciousness governed by desire towards domestic life and its rewards. It follows that the enlightened person cannot continue in the domestic state of consciousness and life because such person's level of consciousness is devoid of action and desire.

Defining in this way what seems to be a social condition in terms of a state of consciousness is not uncommon in Acharya Shankara's commentaries.<sup>20</sup> Making it even more explicit, Acharya Shankara states: 'Action is inconceivable in one who has the knowledge of Brahman as such a person's self as comprised in the realisation, "I am the supreme Brahman in which all desires are fulfilled and which is above all the worldly shortcomings", and who has no idea of results because one feels no need for anything to be got for oneself from actions done or to be done.'

The opponent then argues that inasmuch as the enlightened person is beyond the purview of scriptures, one could resort indifferently to the life of the householder or of the *vanaprastha*, the hermit, which means without renouncing



Hindu Monks, 1913

rituals. Acharya Shankara replies that involving oneself in these stages is still based on desire because they imply doing some rituals involving agency and a desire of a particular result, heaven for instance, and a means, ritual actions, towards that. In contrast, the enlightened one is in a state of consciousness that is beyond agency and desire.

### **Domestic Life as Desire-based**

One could argue that Acharya Shankara contradicts himself because it seems that for him only certain actions count as desire-based, those of the householder in his domestic life, whereas one should also include as desire-based, actions such as begging which are also triggered by a desire, namely the wish to quench one's thirst and hunger.

Here we have to specify what Acharya Shankara means by desires that are connected with domestic life. After stating that 'domestic life is a product of desire', Acharya Shankara quotes the following passage from the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad*: 'This much indeed is desire.' The whole passage from this Upanishad is: 'He desired, "Let me have a wife, so that I may be born

[as a child]. And let me have wealth, so that I may perform rites.” This much indeed is [the range of] desire.’<sup>21</sup>

In his commentary on this passage, Acharya Shankara explains that this desire occurs in an unenlightened student before marriage. He mentions that the student’s ignorance of the Self is the root of his desire for a wife and so forth. He adds that having a wife qualifies one for rites, so that one may attain the worlds of the gods, heaven, and the like. Acharya Shankara then specifies what is meant by the statement, ‘This much indeed is [the range of] desire.’ He says: ‘Desirable objects are only these—the things comprised by the desire for means, namely, wife, son, wealth and rites. The three worlds, namely, those of human beings, the manes and the gods, are but the results of the above. For the desire for means namely, wife, son, wealth and rites, is for securing these.’

This portrays the broader context of Acharya Shankara’s commentary on the *Aitareya Upanishad*, that is, the prevailing Vedic ritualistic system of means and goals which are all short of the realisation of the transcendental Self. For the enlightened person, both renunciation and begging are not part of this ritualistic system of means necessary for further spiritual goals such as the worlds of gods or heaven. That is why Acharya Shankara treats the actions of renunciation and begging separately in the case of the person of realisation with respect to their motivation by desire. Agnihotra and so forth are for heaven, as part of the ritualistic system, begging is for assuaging one’s physical hunger and thirst which is not a spiritual goal. So, begging is not based on desire of a non-transcendental spiritual goal and of its ritualistic means, as domestic life is.

This allows us to make sense of Acharya Shankara’s position on renunciation of the

enlightened person as follows: Because of the complete fulfilment provided by the transcendental state of Self-consciousness, the enlightened one cannot have desires for lesser, non-transcendental, spiritual goals. This absence of desire for the goals of domestic life as defined by the abovementioned passage from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* and Acharya Shankara’s introduction to his commentary on the *Aitareya Upanishad* makes the means of the said domestic life completely irrelevant for an enlightened person. It is in that sense that it makes no sense for such a person to stay physically in the domestic life. This is additional to the fact that such person is in an actionless state of consciousness and therefore it cannot be said that this person is involved in domestic life wherein, by definition, in the context of the abovementioned texts, one does not experience the transcendental Self. Seeing no usefulness in rituals as a means for a further spiritual goal, the enlightened one stops using them. As Acharya Shankara writes, then, ‘renunciation consists in mere cessation of activity’.

### ***From Renunciation as a Sine Qua Non to the Refutation of Rituals as a Sine Qua Non***

Acharya Shankara does seem to hold inflexibly to the requirement of physical renunciation when one reads in the English translation of his introduction to his commentary on the *Aitareya Upanishad* that ‘monasticism is obligatory’. But this translation can be misleading. The Sanskrit words translated as ‘monasticism is obligatory’ are *parivrajyam kartavyam*. They would be better translated as ‘wandering mendicancy is to be resorted to’ or ‘has to be resorted to’. This statement does convey the sense of an injunction, but not the meaning of renunciation as an indispensable way for direct

self-knowledge and liberation. The context is important here. The opponent says that according to scriptures physical renunciation should not be done, because rituals are prescribed for life. Acharya Shankara responds by quoting many scriptures that do prescribe it for Self-knowledge. He does not say that for the purpose of proving that physical renunciation is 'obligatory' as a *sine qua non* for enlightenment, but first of all in order to prove that it is prescribed, and that, as a logical consequence, ritual actions are not a *sine qua non* for enlightenment and liberation.

### **Renunciation for the Unenlightened Person**

According to Acharya Shankara, the scriptures prescribe physical renunciation and the attitudes of a renunciant as a way to devote oneself completely to the means of enlightenment 'in their totality'. Physical renunciation can thus be viewed as a condition for a full-time meditative job that is not possible for the householder, given the many occupations. The intent here seems pragmatic: if you aim at a goal, applying the means intensively, full time, will increase your chances to get to the goal more quickly. The main means of the unenlightened renunciant is meditation and according to Acharya Shankara, it should also be the main means of the householder.<sup>22</sup> The main difference is the type of focus, exclusive or mixed, and the time available, full- or part-time.

Yet all that does not mean for Acharya Shankara that without physical renunciation one cannot access Self-knowledge and liberation. In other words, there is only one way to get to liberation and that is direct Self-knowledge, which is by nature devoid of activity; but there are many means and ways of living to get to direct Self-knowledge.

### **The Need for a Broad Contextualisation**

At first sight, Acharya Shankara's introduction to his commentary on the *Aitareya Upanishad* does seem to be inflexibly enjoining physical renunciation to both the enlightened and the unenlightened. But this first impression has to be corrected by resorting to the broader context of Acharya Shankara's works. Otherwise we are left with elementary contradictions that are unlikely from such a philosopher. In what sense? If there is such a statement of a *sine qua non* physical renunciation *after* enlightenment, it applies to cases where one has reached enlightenment *before and without* physical renunciation. Thus, we are left with the contradiction that physical renunciation is indispensable for enlightenment but that, while having dispensed with it, some people did reach enlightenment. Summarising Acharya Shankara's position on renunciation in his introduction to his commentary on the *Aitareya Upanishad* by such an elementary contradiction would not do justice to it.

None of Acharya Shankara's statements on renunciation in his introduction to his commentary on the *Aitareya Upanishad* can be held logically as proof that he contradicts himself. The statements found in other commentaries that only brahmana seekers are eligible to physical renunciation or that the enlightened one may pursue rituals for the guidance of others, are not contradicted by the fact that he doesn't mention these aspects of his teaching in the abovementioned text. Not mentioning something is not contradictory to the meaning of that something. Reading of Acharya Shankara's commentaries shows that one cannot expect that his whole doctrine be contained in any one commentary.

One must be aware that his introduction to his commentary on the *Aitareya Upanishad* does not give a full picture of Acharya Shankara's view

of renunciation. Acharya Shankara emphasises different things according to context: he gives more emphasis on physical renunciation in his introduction to his commentary on the *Aitareya Upanishad* in the context of the refutation of the action-knowledge combination theory, and more emphasis on continuing rituals after enlightenment in his commentary on the Gita because the latter refers to that.<sup>23</sup> For a proper understanding of renunciation in Acharya Shankara's thought, we have to take into account both Acharya Shankara's understanding of the context and his overall purpose as a philosopher.

### A Fundamental Reversal

As I showed in full extent elsewhere, Acharya Shankara's prominent followers came to make physical and monastic renunciation a sine qua non for full Self-knowledge and liberation.<sup>24</sup> And they did it in the name of their founding master. That is why Acharya Shankara unduly acquired the reputation of a dogmatic thinker concerning renunciation in the eyes of many thinkers in India and abroad. Hopefully, this reinterpretation of his philosophy of renunciation will help in restoring in the eyes of scholars and spiritual seekers an unrestricted access to his Advaita philosophy and discipline. ❧

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19. I express my warm thanks to Akilesh Ayyar for his stimulating feedback on the theme of renunciation in Acharya Shankara's introduction to his commentary on the *Aitareya Upanishad*.
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# Swami Vivekananda on Advaita Vedanta

Jeffery D Long

## Advaita Vedanta through History

AS ALL READERS OF *Prabuddha Bharata* will know, Advaita Vedanta is the non-dualistic system of Vedanta philosophy most prominently associated with the figure of Adi Shankaracharya, or Acharya Shankara, to whom scholars typically assign the dates 788–820 of the Common Era (though there is some dispute about these dates).<sup>1</sup> Although there are certainly precedents to Acharya Shankara's non-dual interpretation of the Upanishads, such as the interpretation of the *Mandukya Upanishad* given by his *parama-guru*, Acharya Gaudapada, as presented in the *Mandukya Karika*, it is with Acharya Shankara that this philosophy is most often connected.

Just as there were other thinkers who preceded Acharya Shankara in offering a non-dualistic reading of the Upanishads, there similarly exists a whole succession of thinkers who have commented upon his thought, as well as offering innovative interpretations of their own. These include such figures as Vacaspati Mishra (841–900), Vidyaranya (1350–86), Madhusudana Sarasvati (1565–1650), and Appayya Dikshita (1520–93). The Advaita Vedanta teaching lineage, or *guru-shishya-parampara*, that traces back to Acharya Shankara and beyond continues to the present, in the persons of the Shankaracharyas who head the various *mathas* or monastic

institutions established by Acharya Shankara, or Adi Shankaracharya, which literally means 'the first Shankaracharya'.

In the modern period, too, there have been many prominent Advaita Vedanta teachers or teachers who are clearly inspired by or who teach ideas which are clearly akin to or drawn from Advaita Vedanta. These include Sri Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897–1981), and Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1930–2015), as well as more unconventional teachers of non-duality, including some hailing from the West, such as Eckhart Tolle, Ken Wilber, and Andrew Cohen.

The first prominent teacher of Advaita Vedanta, though, who travelled from India to spread the teaching of non-duality was, of course, Swami Vivekananda. Taking inspiration from his Master, Sri Ramakrishna, Swamiji left India in 1893, sailing to America and presenting at the World's Parliament of Religions, Chicago, as well as establishing the first Vedanta Society in New York in 1894. In 1897, having returned to India, he established the Ramakrishna Mission.

## 'Neo-Vedanta'?

Advaita Vedanta is understood by its adherents to be a presentation of eternal truths. It is not seen as a philosophy that changes, fundamentally, over time. Indeed, the illusory nature of time itself is one of its central teachings.

Nevertheless, it is *not* the case that each Advaita teacher simply restates, in a mechanical fashion, what has been said before. The eternal

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truths themselves do not change; but the form in which they are presented must necessarily be adapted to changing conditions in the material world. If this were not the case, then the entire lineage of Advaita teachers would be superfluous. It would not be necessary for Vidyaranya or Madhusudana Sarasvati or Swamiji or Sri Ramana Maharshi to say or write anything. One could simply read the philosophical writings of Acharya Shankara in order to get the gist of Advaita Vedanta. Or even Acharya Shankara would be superfluous, because one could simply read the Upanishads.

The truths of Advaita Vedanta can be difficult to understand, though. They are very profound and subtle. Explanation is thus required. As times change and the message is carried to different cultures and climates, to people with different kinds of religious and philosophical background, and as the levels of human insight also change in time, the message is presented and nuanced in different ways, appropriate to the audience to whom it is delivered. One can therefore speak of change and innovation in the *expression* of Advaita Vedanta through history: change in the ways in which the eternal ideals are presented to new audiences and new generations.

Over the course of the last few decades, academic scholarship on Advaita Vedanta has had a tendency to affirm a sharp distinction between ‘classical Advaita,’ essentially the Advaita taught by Acharya Shankara, and ‘neo-Advaita’ or ‘neo-Vedanta,’ which is either traced to Swamiji or to the reformers of the Brahmo Samaj who influenced him in his early years. Often, this divide and the prefix ‘neo’ in front of ‘Advaita’ or ‘Vedanta’ is taken to imply some inauthenticity, as if the Vedanta of the modern period is not the ‘real’ Vedanta. The assumption is that the only ‘real’ Advaita Vedanta is that of Acharya Shankara.

While legitimate distinctions can certainly

be made amongst various historical phases of the expression of Advaita Vedanta by various teachers and commentators and while features of modern Advaita certainly exist which distinguish it from its previous iterations, recent scholarship has now begun to show that the divide between earlier and later expressions of Advaita Vedanta has been overstated, and that this overstatement was originally deliberate and done with polemical intent, out of a concern over the popularity of Swamiji’s teaching in the West. The term ‘neo-Vedanta’ was coined by a Roman Catholic Indologist named Paul Hacker (1913–79). Hacker, as James Madaio states, ‘influentially argued that Neo-Vedanta was a nationalistic movement dependent on the “assimilation” of Western ideals. The category “Neo-Vedanta,” in that way, entered mainstream academic discourse as a pejorative term—indiscriminately used in reference to a number of different Hindu thinkers who held variant theological views—and connoting a sense of inauthenticity because “continuity with the past has been broken.”’<sup>2</sup>

Hacker’s dichotomy between ‘neo’ and ‘authentic’ Vedanta depends on viewing Acharya Shankara’s expression of Advaita Vedanta as definitive of authentic Vedanta, thus rendering all other thinkers’ expressions of this philosophy inauthentic. If a scholar were to make an analogous move with regard to Hacker’s own Roman Catholic tradition, it would render all Roman Catholic thought since Thomas Aquinas ‘neo-Catholicism.’ Catholic thinkers of the modern period, like Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner, not to mention Paul Hacker himself, would thereby become ‘neo-Catholic.’

As Madaio argues, the artificial bifurcation of the Hindu tradition into authentic Acharya Shankara’s Advaita and inauthentic ‘neo’ Advaita depends on an ignorance of post-Shankara Vedantic thought; for Swamiji did not simply

appear from nowhere. Nor can it be honestly said that his thought could be reduced entirely to Western influence, even if such influences can certainly be discerned there. There are trends in Advaitic thought that can be traced from Acharya Shankara and through figures such as Vidyananda and Madhusudana Sarasvati straight to Swamiji himself.

### **Swamiji's Contributions to Our Understanding of Advaita Vedanta**

A number of distinctive themes can be observed in Swamiji's presentation of Advaita Vedanta. These include: (1) an interpretation of the relationship between Advaita Vedanta and other Vedantic systems; (2) an emphasis on overcoming our identification with the false self, which he identifies as the source of all suffering; (3) the idea of non-duality as the basis of morality; and (4) the scientific nature of Advaita Vedanta, which makes it a particularly suitable philosophy for the modern era.

Many other themes can certainly be discerned in Swamiji's *Complete Works* as he explicates Advaita Vedanta. These, however, shall be our primary focus, particularly to the extent that these themes are often seen as marking his distinctive contributions to the expression of non-dualistic thought.

### **Advaita Vedanta and Other Vedantic Systems**

Advaita is, of course, not the only conceptual matrix for interpreting the teachings of the Upanishads. These texts and the Vedanta philosophy which they present can be viewed in a variety of ways, each of which corresponds to a specific Vedantic school of thought.

In addition to Advaita Vedanta, which emphasises the ultimate oneness of existence—the idea that all is Brahman—there are various

schools which affirm that there is both a difference and an identity between the multitude of beings making up the universe and the ultimate Oneness. In Sanskrit, these schools can be categorised as *bhedabhedavada*, affirming difference and identity. Amongst these schools, the one with the largest following is certainly the Vishishtadvaita school or 'qualified non-dualism', promulgated by Acharya Ramanuja (1017–1137). And at the other end of the conceptual spectrum from Advaita Vedanta is Dvaita, or dualistic, Vedanta, which affirms that the differences amongst beings are quite real—particularly the distinction between an individual soul or *jiva*, and *ishvara* or God.<sup>3</sup>

Following the lead of his Master, Sri Ramakrishna, Swamiji does not regard only one type of Vedanta to be true and the others false. Rather, he sees truth as advancing in a progression from one system to another:

System after system arises, each one embodying a great idea, and ideals must be added to ideals. And this is the march of humanity. Man never progresses from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lesser truth to higher truth—but it is never from error to truth. The child may develop more than the father, but was the father inane? The child is the father plus something else. If your present state of knowledge is much greater than it was when you were a child, would you look down upon that stage now? Will you look back and call it inanity? Why, your present stage is the knowledge of the child plus something more.<sup>4</sup>

According to Swamiji, each of the three major types of Vedanta philosophy reflects a stage of consciousness. Each is based on the way reality is perceived at a certain point in the spiritual journey to awakening and liberation. Amongst these three, he sees Advaita as the final, highest stage: 'These are the three steps which Vedanta philosophy has taken, and we cannot go any further,



because we cannot go beyond unity. When a science reaches a unity, it cannot by any manner of means go any further. You cannot go beyond this idea of the Absolute' (1.403).

He sees each of these forms of Vedanta as progressing from one stage to another, beginning with dualism and culminating in non-duality, with qualified dualism being an intermediate stage between these two: 'Thus there have been various interpretations, and to my mind they have been progressive, beginning with the dualistic or Dvaita and ending with the non-dualistic or Advaita' (1.357).

In endorsing Advaita Vedanta as representing the highest stage of Vedantic philosophy, Swamiji did a great deal to influence how the Western world perceived Hinduism. In the minds of many, Hindu philosophy came to be seen as simply equal to Advaita Vedanta. This is, of course, not a true reflection of how most Hindus conceive of their spiritual practice. For the average Hindu, bhakti or devotion to the personal supreme Being, in some specific form like Lord Vishnu or Lord Shiva or the Goddess Shakti, and so on, is absolutely central. Bhakti, as a relationship, requires a distinction between the supreme Being who is worshiped and the individual devotee, the worshipper. Advaitic dissolution of all such distinctions is therefore not a central focus of most Hindu practice.

It is important to point out, though, that Swamiji himself never misrepresented Advaita Vedanta as reflecting the majority view among most Hindus. He, in fact, pointed out just the opposite. Describing the three main forms of Vedanta, he said: 'One [system of Vedanta] is the dualistic, or Dvaita; a second is the qualified non-dualistic, or Vishishtadvaita; and a third is the non-dualistic, or Advaita. Of these the dualistic and the qualified non-dualistic include the largest number of the Indian people. The

non-dualists are comparatively few in number' (1.359. Emphasis added.).

According to Swamiji, the fact that comparatively few people are adherents of Advaita Vedanta is not simply an historical accident. It is a function of the relative difficulty of pursuing this particular path: 'All people cannot take up this Advaita philosophy; it is hard. First of all, it is very hard to understand it intellectually. It requires the sharpest of intellects, a bold understanding. Secondly, it does not suit the vast majority of people. So there are these three steps [dualism, qualified non-dualism, and non-dualism]. Begin with the first one. Then by thinking of that and understanding it, the second will open itself' (1.404).

In affirming the relative difficulty of the non-dualistic path, Swamiji is echoing the teaching of the Bhagavadgita that both the non-dual path of knowledge or jnana yoga and the dualistic or qualified non-dualist path of bhakti yoga are to be affirmed, but that the non-dualist path is the more difficult of the two:

Arjuna spoke: 'There are some who are constantly disciplined, devotees who worship you [the personal form of the Supreme Being]. There are others who devote themselves to the imperishable, the unmanifest [the impersonal Brahman]. Who among them have the best knowledge of yoga?'

The Blessed One spoke: 'I consider them to be the best disciplined who focus their minds on me, who, constant in their discipline, worship me with the greatest faith. But those who worship the imperishable, the unmanifest, which is beyond words, which is found everywhere and is inconceivable, sublime on the mountaintop, unmoving and firm, who have gained complete control over the senses and equanimity toward all beings, rejoicing in the welfare of all beings, they also attain me. There is greater distress for those who have set their thoughts on the unmanifest, because it is difficult for those who are

embodied to reach a goal that is itself unmanifest. But those who surrender all of their actions to me and who are focused on me alone, who meditate on me with yoga, and worship me, I will lift them up out of the ocean of the cycle of death and rebirth, Arjuna, once they have set their thoughts on me.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, echoing Sri Krishna in the Gita, Swamiji also recommends that his listeners 'Begin with the first one', namely, the first step in the threefold progression from duality, to qualified non-duality, to non-duality. Sri Krishna says of those who take the dualistic, devotional path, 'I will lift them up out of the ocean of the cycle of death and rebirth'.

According to Swamiji, by focusing on this first stage, 'the second will open itself'. By starting with duality and devotion to the personal God, we gradually ascend to the next stage, the stage of qualified non-duality, in which we see ourselves, the whole universe, and the personal God as part of one greater spiritual Reality: the reality of Brahman. And from there, the next realisation is the realisation of the sole reality of Brahman alone.

Swamiji summarises the basic world views of these three philosophies as follows:

Dualistic Vedantists ... say there are three existences in this universe—God, soul, and nature. Nature and soul are, as it were, the body of God, and in this sense it may be said that God and the whole universe are one. But this nature and all these various souls remain different from each other through all eternity. ... The Advaita Vedantists—the non-dualists—reject this theory of the soul, and, having nearly the whole range of the Upanishads in their favour, build their philosophy entirely upon them.<sup>6</sup>

Dualism, in other words, begins with the premise that the universe contains diversity and that this diversity is a real, fundamental feature of existence. Specifically, existence is divided into God or *ishvara*, the personal supreme

Being who presides over everything, followed by the many souls or *jivas*, inhabiting the universe and then material nature itself, *prakriti*, a term derived from the Sankhya system of philosophy. Dualism, in short, is a common-sense approach to existence, based on our common experience of being individuals in a universe made up of other individuals.

Qualified non-dualism arises from the realisation that all of the diverse beings making up the universe collectively form a whole, a totality. And, as Swamiji says, 'in this sense it may be said that God and the whole universe are one'.

Non-dualism, however, is the view that existence itself—that which underlies the totality of being—is ultimately all that can be said to be truly real. 'Real' here means subsisting at all times. Other beings change. They come and go out of existence, or their qualities alter from moment to moment, or across eons of cosmic time. But existence itself, *sat*, the Real, persists through all of these changes. Everything else is ultimately *asat* or unreal. The aim of non-dualism as a spiritual practice is to move, in the words of the Upanishads, 'from the unreal to the real, from darkness [that is, ignorance] to light [wisdom], from death [and the cycle of death and rebirth] to immortality [or moksha]'.<sup>7</sup> According to Swamiji, it is non-dualism that best captures the import of the Upanishads, taken as a totality.



Swamiji characterises the teaching of the Upanishads as follows:

All the books contained in the Upanishads have one subject, one task before them—to prove the following theme: ‘Just as by the knowledge of one lump of clay we have the knowledge of all the clay in the universe, so what is that, knowing which we know everything in the universe?’ The idea of the Advaitists is to generalise the whole universe into one—that something which is really the whole of this universe. And they claim that this whole universe is one, that it is one Being manifesting itself in all these various forms. They admit that what the Sankhya calls nature [prakriti] exists, but say that nature is God. It is this Being, the Sat, which has become converted into all this—the universe, man, soul, and everything that exists. Mind and Mahat [the original, collective mind from which all individual minds emerge, the first manifestation of prakriti] are but the manifestations of that one Sat.<sup>8</sup>

By ‘God,’ Swamiji here means Brahman, the infinite Reality, Being, or *sat*, from which all else, including the personal God, emerges. According to this interpretation, God alone is real. All else is a temporarily appearing manifestation of what is, in reality, infinite, unmanifest Being. This infinite Being is therefore the true identity of all living beings. We feel we are separate beings, but in reality we are one Being. This realisation is a central one for Swamiji.

### **Realizing the True Self**

According to Swamiji, the misperception that we are separate individuals is the source of all of our suffering. Correspondingly, he affirms that the way to true happiness is the realisation of our true nature as one absolute, universal, and infinite Being:

Therefore, to gain this infinite universal individuality, this miserable little prison-individuality

must go. Then alone can death cease when I am one with life, then alone can misery cease when I am one with happiness itself, then alone can all errors cease when I am one with knowledge itself; and this is the necessary scientific conclusion. Science has proved to me that physical individuality is a delusion, that really my body is one little continuously changing body in an unbroken ocean of matter; and Advaita (unity) is the necessary conclusion with my other counterpart, soul (1.14).

Our true, infinite and universal individuality is not the self as we conventionally conceive of it—the ego, whose history and traits are very much tied to the perishable physical body. The true Self—with a capital ‘S’—is the Atman. And, as the Upanishads teach, the Atman and Brahman are, in the end identical.

What is it like to experience one’s true nature, to realise one’s true, universal individuality and shed the illusory ego? According to Swamiji:

When the Vedantist has realised his own nature, the whole world has vanished for him. It will come back again, but no more the same world of misery. The prison of misery has become changed into Sat, Chit, Ananda—Existence Absolute, Knowledge Absolute, Bliss Absolute—and the attainment of this is the goal of the Advaita Philosophy (1.365).

Even in this life, he will feel that he is one with the universe. For a time, as it were, the whole of this phenomenal world will disappear for him, and he will realise what he is. But so long as the Karma of this body remains, he will have to live. This state, when the veil has vanished and yet the body remains for some time, is what the Vedantists call the Jivanmukti, the living freedom (ibid.).

It is interesting to note the parallel between Advaita as understood by Swamiji and the philosophy of Buddhism. Buddhism also teaches that self, at least as conventionally conceived, is the root of all evil, and that when we shed

all concepts of self, we shall be happy and free, entering the bliss of nirvana. Advaita, though, teaches that when the false self is shed, the true Self emerges. It is arguably the case that these traditions are speaking of the same experience, beyond ego.

### **Non-Duality as the Basis of Morality**

A very strong emphasis in Swamiji's teaching and in his interpretation of non-dualism, is the idea that non-duality is the ultimate scientific basis for morality. By realising that we are finally one with all other beings, we learn to regard them as ourselves and to see their joys and sorrows as our own, which is, of course, the very definition of compassion. Similarly, if we cultivate, according to Swamiji, a state of unselfish compassion, we will quickly realise our true Self. Swamiji calls selfless service as a path to realisation the karma yoga, and gives it just as much prominence in his teaching as bhakti yoga and jnana yoga. He says: 'Behind everything the same divinity is existing, and out of this comes the basis of morality. Do not injure another. Love everyone as your own self, because the whole universe is one. In injuring another, I am injuring myself; in loving another, I am loving myself' (1.364).

Swamiji's interpretation of Advaita Vedanta provides a metaphysical basis for the Golden Rule, versions of which can be found throughout the world's religious traditions—that we should treat others as we, ourselves, wish to be treated—in Christian language, that I should love my neighbour as myself. Advaita Vedanta grounds this principle. I should love my neighbour as myself because my neighbour, on a fundamental level, *is* myself: or rather, we share the same Self.<sup>9</sup> I should treat others as I would wish to be treated because they and I are not, in the end, different.

When we realise that there is no ultimate distinction to be made between self and other, we are

willing to see the other's interests as no different from our own and to practise compassion. Harking back to his emphasis on overcoming the false self in order to realise the true Self, Swamiji continues:

From this also springs that principle of Advaita morality which has been summed up in one word—self-abnegation. The Advaitist says, this little personalised self is the cause of all my misery. This individualised self, which makes me different from all other beings brings hatred and jealousy and misery, struggle and all other evils. And when this idea has been got rid of, all struggle will cease, all misery vanish. So this is to be given up. We must always hold ourselves ready, even to give up our lives for the lowest beings. When a man has become ready even to give up his life for a little insect, he has reached the perfection which the Advaitist wants to attain; and at that moment when he has become thus ready, the veil of ignorance falls away from him, and he will feel his own nature.<sup>10</sup>

Just as the idea of self as the source of all misery resonates with Buddhism, the idea of a person who 'has become ready even to give up his life for a little insect' calls to mind the intense and profound commitment to nonviolence in thought, word, and deed, to ahimsa, found in the Jain tradition, even to the point where some Jain ascetics give up their lives in a fast to the death, known as *sallekhana* or *santhara*. The idea is very close to that expressed by Swamiji, that our unselfishness, if we are to realise our true, infinite Self, must be diminished to nothing, even to the point where we would be willing to give up our lives for the welfare of any other living being. The morality that takes non-duality as its basis is universal, not discriminating among different beings: 'According to the Advaita philosophy, then, this differentiation of matter, these phenomena, are, as it were, for a time, hiding the real nature of man; but the latter really has not been changed at all. In the lowest worm, as well

as in the highest human being, the same divine nature is present' (1.364).

### The Scientific Nature of Advaita Vedanta

Another distinctive emphasis of Swamiji's interpretation of Advaita Vedanta is his perception that, because the Absolute it affirms is of an impersonal character, this philosophy is, in many ways, akin to science. Its teachings are based on a non-arbitrary analysis of the nature of experience, rather than on the proclamations of an historical prophet or even a personal God: 'If any theory of religion can stand the test of modern reasoning, it is the Advaita ... It is the highest generalisation, beyond even personality, generalisation which is common to every being' (1.376).

Like science, Advaita Vedanta generalises from the particular to the general. In science, this is the process of developing hypotheses and theories, generalisations, to explain specific phenomena. At a certain point, when these generalisations have been found to work consistently over a long enough period of time, we come to think of them as 'laws of nature'. But the highest generalisation of all, the ultimate abstraction, is the idea of Being itself, existence itself, *sat*. What is the reality behind all of reality? What makes a real thing real? It seems impossible to conceive of anything beyond the concept of existence itself.

This is a continuation of the Upanishadic theme of knowing all particular things made of clay by knowing the nature of clay itself, of knowing all particular things made of gold by knowing the nature of gold itself. The very thingness of a thing, the quality of reality that underlies all that exists, is existence itself. And it alone is our true nature, according to Advaita Vedanta. The claims of this philosophy are not ultimately meant to be taken on faith, but are to be realised directly, through the process of hearing,

*shravanam*; intellectual reflection, *mananam*; and direct realisation, *nididhyasanam*.

### Conclusion

Advaita Vedanta is an ancient philosophy with many facets and aspects. Its subtle depths continue to be explored and its profound truths unfolded by new generations of thinkers who have committed themselves to understanding it, and realising its truths for themselves.

Swamiji's contributions to this process have been many, far too many, to list or explore in a single article. But it is hoped that this brief examination might give some insight both into Advaita Vedanta as such, as a philosophy, and into the unique stamp which Swamiji has placed upon it through his interpretation and explication of its ideals. ❧

### Notes and References

1. For an overview of some of the issues involved in these disputes, see Swami Tapasyananda's introduction in Madhava-Vidyaranya, *Sankara Digvijaya: The Traditional Life of Sri Sankaracharya*, trans. Swami Tapasyananda (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1992), xv-xxxv.
2. James Madaio, 'Rethinking Neo-Vedānta: Swami Vivekananda and the Selective Historiography of Advaita Vedānta', *Religions*, 8/6 (June 2017), 101; 3.
3. The specific details of the various systems of Vedanta outside of Advaita and the biographies of their founders are well documented by Swami Tapasyananda in his book, *Bhakti Schools of Vedānta: Lives and Philosophies of Rāmānuja, Nimbārka, Madhva, Vallabha, and Caitanya* (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1990).
4. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 2.365-6.
5. Gita, 12.1-7.
6. *Complete Works*, 1.361-2.
7. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 1.3.28.
8. *Complete Works*, 1.362.
9. See Pravrajika Vrajaprana, *Vedanta: A Simple Introduction* (Hollywood: Vedanta, 1999), 14.
10. *Complete Works*, 1.364-5.

# ***Liberating Samvada—Advaita Vedanta as A Tradition of Ritualised Dialogue***

**Reid B Locklin**

**I** FIRST ENCOUNTERED THE TEACHING of Advaita Vedanta by reading various texts. But I only became a sadhaka through dialogue.

A little over two decades ago, when I began my doctoral studies in Catholic theology with the comparativist Francis X Clooney, S J, I had read and even written essays on Adi Shankaracharya. I was struck, however, by the great teacher's insistence that liberating truth requires the personal mediation of a guru and this also cohered well with my own Catholic convictions about the benefit of reading Christian scriptures in conversation with the living tradition of the Church.

So I sought out instruction. First, I attended retreats at the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, a quiet ashram in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in the US state of Pennsylvania. Next, I was privileged to receive tutorial instruction and to attend the public presentations of an acharya from the same tradition in Chennai, India. Since that time, I have continued to attend discourses, retreats, and lectures in the Chinmaya Mission and the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, as well as listening to recorded teaching sessions, and occasionally watching them online.

I have no doubt that, insofar as I have any true understanding of Acharya Shankara and the

Advaita teaching, it is due to my contact with this living tradition. But this contact has also provoked an insight about the essential character of Advaita, in history and in practice. It slowly dawned on me that the kind of importance that Catholics like me or many of my Vaishnava friends might ascribe to religious ritual would be ascribed by Advaitins more typically to a disciplined practice of discourse, to satsang, to the free exchange of questions and answers between teachers and students, that is, to dialogue.

This is not to say that Advaitins do not perform rituals: I have appreciated pujas in the Ramakrishna tradition and the various ashramas of the Arsha Vidya tradition nearly always include a consecrated image for devotees' worship. These, however, are generally accorded only secondary importance and are sometimes subject to critique. According to Swami Chinmayananda, as just one example, prayers and 'ritualistic injunctions' cannot bring about moksha, absent Vedantic study in conversation with a guru or in the small study groups that are a signature feature of the Chinmaya Mission. The primary religious activity of most contemporary Advaita movements is dialogue and it is ordinarily only through such dialogue that one can achieve liberating self-knowledge.

From these observations, I formed a simple if somewhat counter-intuitive conclusion, namely, that dialogue is a kind of ritual in Advaita tradition and Advaita Vedanta itself can be fruitfully

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interpreted as a tradition of ritualised dialogue. This insight has guided my reflection and study of the tradition for at least the last decade and it received its fullest expression in my 2011 book *Liturgy of Liberation*, a theological commentary on the *Upadesha-sahasri* or one thousand teachings of Acharya Shankara.<sup>1</sup> For this issue of *Prabuddha Bharata* dedicated to 'Visions of Advaita', therefore, it seemed suitable to offer a vision of Advaita in terms of ritualised dialogue, with specific reference to the *Upadesha-sahasri*. Most of the exposition has been adapted from a parallel discussion in the first chapter of my book. To this exposition, I have added a concluding reflection. Approaching Advaita Vedanta in terms of its distinctive commitment to, and performance of, liberating dialogue, I want to suggest, helps us both engage the tradition itself at a deeper level and to draw insight from it for fostering closer relationships even in the midst of genuine disagreements on matters of truth and liberation.

### **'I Composed this Dialogue'**

To develop an initial sense of Advaita as a tradition of ritualised dialogue, we can do no better than to take a close look at the texture and content of the *Upadesha-sahasri*. This independent treatise is a very distinctive work, both among Acharya Shankara's certainly authentic writings and in the wider corpus of classical Advaita. Unlike the very popular treatise *Vivekachudamani*, 'The Crest-Jewel of Discernment', no single dominant theme emerges from this compilation of 'a thousand teachings', and there is no overarching narrative to bind it into a single whole.

The work consists of two major components: a 'verse portion', *padya-bandha*, of nineteen chapters and a 'prose portion', *gadya-bandha*, of three chapters. Each of these twenty-two chapters reveals evidence of independent composition. In

the text's final form, the three prose chapters follow a clear logical sequence, whereas seventeen of the nineteen verse chapters are arranged in order of increasing length. The exceptions are the first and last verse chapters, which thereby lend coherence to the verse portion and perhaps also to the *Upadesha-sahasri* as a whole.

The strong impression given by this work, then, is that of a loose collection of writings, likely composed on different occasions and for a variety of purposes, but eventually gathered together into a single work by a later disciple or possibly by Acharya Shankara himself. Given this fact, there is little reason to read it from beginning to end. Instead, we can enter at USP 8, traditionally entitled 'The Merging of the Mind', following, with small modifications, the translation of Swami Jagadananda. The chapter begins with a kind of protest made by the true self, Atman, against the mind and personality with which it is so persistently confused: 'The connection of enjoyment and the like with me, oh my mind, who am by nature consciousness itself is due to the delusion created by you. As I am free from all attributes, there is no result accruing to me from your efforts.'<sup>2</sup>

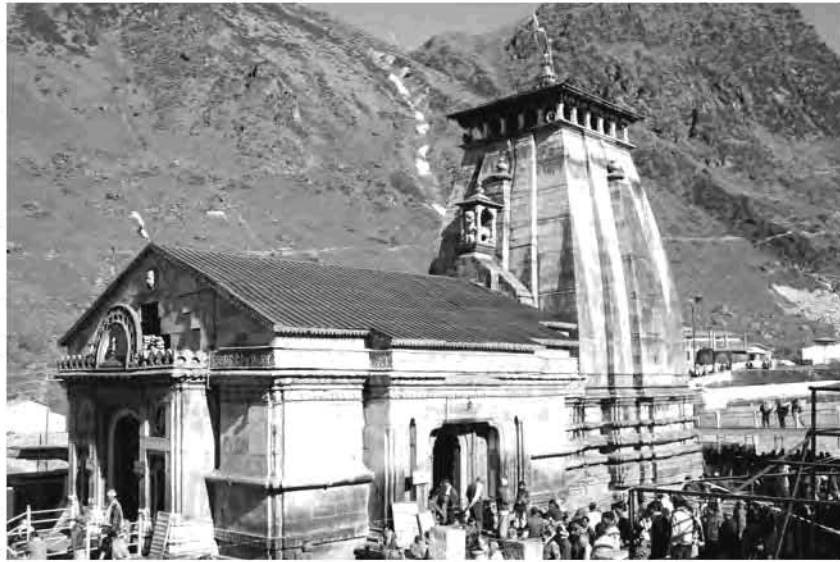
The next three verses develop this idea, first enjoining the mind to overcome its vain striving and ceaseless activities (2.8.2) and then expounding the true nature of the 'I' as none other than highest Brahman, ever-present in all beings yet entirely free from action, impurity, and any form of relationship (2.8.2-4). 'I have, therefore, no benefit to be derived from anything done by you', declares the ever-present and ever-free Atman. 'As you are not other than myself, you can have no effort nor its results' (2.8.4).

The themes introduced in this short account clearly echo most traditional interpretations of Acharya Shankara's Advaita teaching, setting out the ultimate non-difference of Atman and

Brahman and inveighing against identification with such phenomenal realities as the individual mind or personality. What makes the present chapter stand out is its rhetorical point of view, speaking in the ‘voice’ of Atman, as well as its final two stanzas, in which yet another authorial voice provides a brief gloss on this distinctive literary form: ‘Considering that people are attached to the ideas of cause and effect, I have composed this dialogue leading to the understanding of the real nature of the self in order that they might get freed from this [bondage]. A person gets liberated from ignorance, the cause of great fear, and roams, free from desires, free from grief, a knower of the self, the same in all beings, and happy, if one ponders over this dialogue (2.8.5–6).

In this gloss, Acharya Shankara speaks directly to the hearer about his intention in composing these verses. Having observed people in bondage, he says, he has devised a helpful instrument to be used in seeking release from it. What sort of instrument is likely to accomplish this all-important goal? This too is specified, and even emphasised by repetition: only a *samvada*, a ‘dialogue’ or ‘conversation’, fits the bill.

The dialogue represented in the eighth chapter of the second section is, of course, one that could never actually occur in ordinary life. According to Advaita teaching, the speaker, Atman, is ‘one without a second’, beyond the slightest trace of distinction or relation with any other reality. Yet Acharya Shankara depicts Atman engaging in conversation at various points throughout the *Upadesha-sahasri*, as he does, for example, in the previous chapter, the seventh chapter of the second section, in the practice of



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repetition in the third chapter of the first section, and especially in the dialogue which concludes the verse portion in the nineteenth chapter of the second section. The ultimate reality that pervades and grounds all our experience is, it turns out, rather chatty.

If we expand the term ‘dialogue’ to include any form of conversation or debate, moreover, it emerges as a very prominent feature of the *Upadesha-sahasri* as a whole. The first two chapters of the first section can be described as *samvadas* in a very literal sense. In each, a student approaches a teacher to inquire about liberation and a lively debate ensues. And, throughout the verse chapters, Acharya Shankara’s voice is merely one of many voices debating issues of bondage and liberation. At one point in the middle of the first chapter of the first section, Acharya Shankara dismisses the position represented in preceding verses with the phrase, ‘some people hold this view’, before launching an extended refutation (1.1.11). In another place, after a series of verses presenting Buddhist arguments, he exclaims: ‘Please tell me who will attain liberation ... according to you who hold



that everything is annihilated?’ (2.16.30). Sometimes it is difficult to discern the precise boundaries between Acharya Shankara’s own verses and those offering the positions of adversaries.

Less difficult to discern is the central importance given by Acharya Shankara to such dialogue itself. Freedom from bondage, the text implies in all its parts, necessarily involves something more than ‘inquiry’ or ‘study’ as conventionally understood, at least in the West. It involves vibrant interactions, conversations, and debates on a number of related levels—between student and teacher, between the teachers of this tradition and rival teachers, even between the true self of all beings and the ultimately unreal mind and personality of the seeker. Hence, it may not introduce too great a distortion to see in the final verses of the eighth chapter of the second section, a good characterisation of the *Upadesha-sahasri* and, by extension, Advaita tradition as a whole. It is a *samvada*, an extended and variegated ‘conversation’ or ‘dialogue’, composed to help both seekers and teachers in the ongoing communication of a liberating truth.

### **The Boat of Knowledge**

If we take ‘dialogue’ as a useful point of entry into the *Upadesha-sahasri*, however, we also face a point of tension internal to the text. For this ‘dialogue’ is also something that ‘has been composed’ (2.8.5). On the one hand, it seems highly likely that the preserved writing has its roots in actual verbal exchanges. On the other hand, in the process of composition and compilation, these living conversations have been scripted in a fixed form, or better, a fair variety of fixed forms, now bound together, set in order, and thus organised into a kind of curriculum in liberation. The text does not stand alone as an independent composition; instead, its various scripted teachings draw our attention to an ongoing network

of pedagogical situations, re-enacted and re-invented each time a new conversation begins.

Perhaps the best example of such scripting can be found in the *Upadesha-sahasri*’s prose portion. All three chapters of the first section could stand as independent compositions. In the first, for example, Acharya Shankara presents what he describes as a ‘method of instruction,’ an idealised narrative in which a Brahmin disciple who has already taken up the life of a wandering ascetic, approaches an anonymous teacher, is examined, found fit to receive instruction, and immediately trained in the important Upanishadic sentences, which establish the unity of Atman and Brahman (1.1.1–8). The subsequent discussion takes these scriptural texts as its point of departure and the teacher reminds the student of them at key points.

Such scriptural citations are notably absent in the second chapter of the first section. In the place of the first chapter’s ‘disciple’ and teacher, it begins with a ‘life-long student’ approaching a ‘knower of Brahman’ later identified with the term ‘guru,’ and this is followed by a highly technical question about the experience of pain (1.2.45–6), all narrated in the past tense. In the third chapter of the first section, the teacher himself falls away, leaving only a sole ‘seeker after’ moksha and a ‘method of repetition’ to bring this seeker to one’s goal (1.3.112). None of these chapters makes direct reference to the others. Each has a unique narrative structure, a definite beginning, and a definite conclusion. At the end of the second chapter of the first section, in fact, the disciple is declared to have attained moksha, there and then (1.2.110). What further need of the meditative practice prescribed in the third chapter of the first section?

One can easily imagine that these three chapters had their origins in different teaching situations, with different students, and even possibly

in different phases of Acharya Shankara's development, as has been suggested by such historical scholars as Paul Hacker and Tilmann Vetter. Nevertheless, once joined together into a single script, they come to embody a canonical three-fold vision of Advaita study: 'hearing of the Vedic scriptures, *shravana*; disciplined 'reflection' on their content, *manana*, and sustained practice of 'contemplation', *nididhyasana*. The continuous numbering of all three chapters in the manuscript, as well as textual cues such as 'now' to mark the beginning of the script (1.1.1) and repetition of its final word to punctuate its finality (1.3.116), merely ratify a more basic insight into its essential coherence as different moments or dimensions of one Advaita teaching practice.

A second, rather different example of such scripting can be found in the seventeenth chapter of the second section of *Upadesha-sahasri*. Again, there are good reasons to regard this chapter as having its own integrity, even among the nineteen chapters of the second section. First of all, as already noted, chapters two to eighteen of the second section are not arranged in any logical order, but only by length: the seventeenth chapter stands where it does simply because it is longer than the sixteenth chapter and shorter than the eighteenth chapter. Moreover, like the eighteenth chapter of the second section, but unlike any of the other chapters in this section, the seventeenth chapter is bounded by opening and closing salutations (2.17.1–3, 88–9). This mirrors the introduction and conclusion of the second section itself (2.1.1, 2.19.28), and thus offers another cue to suggest that the chapter can be read entirely on its own. We might even hypothesise that the seventeenth chapter of the second section, as a self-contained unit within the *Upadesha-sahasri*, offers a kind of microcosm or précis of the verse portion and possibly even of the whole Advaita teaching.

This hypothesis receives some support from the traditional title of the chapter, 'Right Knowledge', as well as from the sheer scope of the scripted discourse it provides.

Whereas the three chapters of the prose portion depict various moments or aspects of the traditional teaching practice, the seventeenth chapter of the second section renders this same practice into a tightly organised treatise, with a preliminary introduction (2.17.4–6), a thesis statement (2.17.7), an account of what must be rejected (2.17.14–31) and what must be accepted (2.17.32–50) in the pursuit of 'right knowledge', a practical description of the concrete means to undertake such pursuit (2.17.51–8), a vivid portrait of the transformation such knowledge brings (2.17.59–81), and a final summary and conclusion (2.17.82–5).

Along the way, Acharya Shankara also offers a grab bag of analogies and explanatory devices that occur frequently throughout his writings: analysis of the three experiential states of waking, dream, and deep sleep (2.17.14–5, 17–8, 26–8, 39, 65–6); separation of clarified butter from milk as an image of liberation (2.17.61); and various pedagogical strategies to explain our experience of the created world, such as the appearance of objects in a clear jewel (2.17.16), reflections of sun or moon on the surface of water (2.17.27–8, 34–5, 56), magician and magical illusion (2.17.29–31), and the stationary magnet that draws or repels other objects by its mere presence (2.17.80). Each of these images sheds light on one or another aspect of the Advaita teaching and each thus finds a place in the structured argument of the seventeenth chapter of the second section.

If one wanted to understand Advaita as a system of thought, this verse chapter would be a good place to start. For all its comprehensiveness and organisation, however, it is no more

than yet another scripted dialogue. It is not to be confused with the living conversations it undoubtedly both reflects and intends further to generate. Indeed, at the climax of his argument in this chapter, Acharya Shankara points beyond its verses to a more primary, extra-textual reality:

The seeker after truth should withdraw into the Self the love for external things. For this love, secondary to that of the Self, is inconstant and entails pain. This seeker should then take refuge in a teacher, a knower of Brahman who is tranquil, free, bereft of actions, and established in Brahman, as the Shruti and Smriti say, 'One who has a teacher knows' and 'Know that' (2.17.51–2).

That teacher should immediately take the disciple ... in the boat of knowledge of Brahman across the great ocean of darkness within (2.17.53).

This image of the 'boat of knowledge' also appears in the third verse of the first chapter of the first section and thereby frames the dialogues of the first prose chapter and indeed of the entire prose portion, at least in its final form. Through this shared image, these two scripts—one depicting a series of external and internal dialogues, the other mapping and structuring the content of such dialogues in poetic form—begin to overlap, interpenetrate, and qualify one another. Like the various illustrations of the seventeenth chapter of the second section itself, neither of these scripts offers a complete picture. Bound together and juxtaposed in the *Upadesha-sahasri*'s final form, they each illumine one or another aspect of what should surely be regarded as a single 'boat of knowledge', a teaching tradition and instructional method designed to carry disciples across an ocean of ignorance to a farther shore. The boat of knowledge can be identified, in a certain sense, as nothing other than *samvada*, fixed in various scripts like those of the

*Upadesha-sahasri*, only to be unfixed again in a living and continuous oral performance.

### Orality and Ritualisation

The kind of textual inter-connection we witness in the first and second sections (1.1.3 and 2.17.50–2) both drawing on the same scriptures and offering the same basic image in different literary contexts, is certainly striking. But it is by no means unique. We might say that such intertextuality represents yet another persistent feature of the *Upadesha-sahasri* in its final form.

We discover overlapping themes and connections among the *Upadesha-sahasri*'s various teaching scripts first and foremost in what appears to be a well-travelled fund of explanatory devices, many of which reappear not only in the *Upadesha-sahasri*, but throughout Advaita tradition. This includes such illustrations as the clear jewel that appears to be red in the presence of a red flower, to which we have already alluded in our treatment of the seventeenth chapter of the second section, as well as the ubiquitous piece of rope mistaken for a snake. Beyond such recurring examples, a smaller set of shared themes and tropes can establish resonances between otherwise disparate texts. Sometimes the connection between two passages is so strong that one suspects borrowing, such as when a particular grammatical argument about 'knowing' and the status of 'knowledge' in Atman is employed by the model teacher (1.2.76–7) and by Acharya Shankara himself (2.18.53–4). In at least one case, intertextuality shades into identity, when the same line of Sanskrit verse appears verbatim in two different stanzas of two different chapters (2.7.1, 2.18.94). The trope, used to address two different points of interpretation, acquires a different meaning in each context, but the words and rhythm of the Sanskrit verse are essentially the same.

Determining the priority of one or another occurrence of a shared image, argument, or line of verse would, in most cases, be a nearly impossible feat. The first chapter of the first section may offer the only exception. Here, concluding an argument about the proper locus of pain, the teacher states:

The impressions of pain must have the same seat as pain itself. As they are perceived during the time when memory is possible, these impressions must have the same location as pain. The aversion to cuts, burns and the like, the causes of pain must also have the same seat as the impressions [of pain]. It is therefore said, 'Desire, aversion and fear have a seat in common with that of the impressions of colours. As they have for their seat the intellect, the knower, the self, is always pure, and devoid of fear (I.I.35).

At one level, this is just a technical argument about pain, memory, and perception, the nuances of which would surely be lost on many readers. More important than the content of the account, however, is the specific manner in which it is resolved: that is, by quoting a stanza from elsewhere in the *Upadesha-sahasri* with the marker, 'it has been said' (2.15.13). A number of scholars have concluded, from this citation, that the verse portion of the *Upadesha-sahasri* probably existed in textual form by the time Acharya Shankara composed the first chapter of the first section, such that one of its stanzas could be quoted with the words, 'it has been said'. But this may presume a model of authorship that ill suits the *Upadesha-sahasri*. If, as I have suggested, this text can be regarded as a complex tapestry of scripted dialogues, then we can imagine that many of its teachings may have been in wide use in discourse and debate before ever being committed to writing. The *Upadesha-sahasri*, in other words, may well have been brought into written form at a relatively late moment in its 'composition'.

It has long been recognised that ancient South Asian texts such as the Vedic scriptures and the sutra literature are primarily oral in character. The Vedas in particular were likely preserved in oral memory long before they were written down, and Acharya Shankara identifies a powerful memory as one of the requisite characteristics of the ideal teacher (I.I.6). It thus seems reasonable to suppose that the intertextuality of the *Upadesha-sahasri* is rooted in a deeper orality, by which a common repertoire of images and examples, along with certain highly effective lines of argument and of verse, might have been memorised and deployed in a variety of ways and contexts.

When the teacher of the first chapter of the first section quotes one of the chapters of the second section in conversation with a student, he may not so much cite an authoritative 'text' as rehearse an alternative 'script' drawn from this repertoire. We can well imagine that the stanza quoted by the teacher pre-dates the composition of the first prose chapter, but the kind of dialogue depicted therein pre-dates both texts, and can therefore claim a deeper kind of priority. The intertextuality of the *Upadesha-sahasri*, in other words, becomes another pointer to that broader, predominantly oral and dialogical tradition we have already identified as the 'boat of knowledge'.

There is no doubt that the *Upadesha-sahasri* is the product of a highly literate social world. The mere preservation of the manuscript traditions, depending as they did upon continual re-copying, bears this out. Acharya Shankara himself almost certainly emerged from and was comfortable in this culture. Nevertheless, the *Upadesha-sahasri* is a teaching text, the fruit of what were probably innumerable lived conversations and debates. Its teachings seem designed more to be heard than to be read, to be concretely enacted



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in the dynamic process they themselves reflect and, especially in the prose portion, explicitly model. The twenty-two chapters and two major portions of the *Upadesha-sahasri* may thus be said to enshrine a kind of oral textuality or textualised orality, whose full expression lies outside and beyond the pages of the text. They are not meant primarily to be read. They are meant to be performed, or at least to provide a model for the kind of dialogical performance that most conduces to human persons' highest good.

Considered in this light, the various scripts of the *Upadesha-sahasri* resemble the performance guidelines or rubrics that historians and anthropologists often associate with ritual. In the study of religion, the category of 'ritual' has been interpreted in various ways. For some theorists, only those scripted practices that imply worship of a deity, such as a Catholic Eucharist, a Vaishnava puja or a Vedic yajna, count as ritual. Others, such as Catherine Bell, suggest that many other activities can become 'ritualised' when they are conducted in such a way that they stand apart from everyday life. Ritualised practice, on Bell's

reading, can be as formal as a high Latin Mass, as chaotic and spontaneous as a festival procession, or as apparently secular as a cricket match, so long as it sets itself clearly apart from other, more ordinary ways of acting in that social context.

When we consider the dialogues that dominate the pages of the *Upadesha-sahasri*, it seems obvious that these are not ordinary conversations. They enforce standards of *adhyakara* or fitness to restrict those who can participate in them, they follow a specific protocol, and they aim for a result that is, by definition, entirely apart from the desires,

goals, and activities of conventional social life. These dialogues are ritualised. Insofar as they define the practice of Advaita, from the time of Acharya Shankara to the present day, they define this tradition as an ongoing performance of ritualised dialogue.

### Concluding Reflections

The *Upadesha-sahasri* is just one text in a universe of many texts of classical Advaita Vedanta. At the same time, there are a number of reasons to give its portrait of the tradition special weight. First of all, as one of the non-commentarial works accepted as the work of Acharya Shankara by a nearly unanimous consensus of historical scholarship, it would seem to offer a privileged glance into the social dynamics of Advaita Vedanta at a key moment in its development. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the basic contours of its vision of liberation through a disciplined performance of dialogue, *samvada*, receives further support from texts such as the *Vivekacudamani*, from the image of Acharya Shankara traveling across the subcontinent in a dialogical conquest of the quarters,

*dig-vijaya*, in the traditional hagiographies, and above all in the many living dialogues of Advaita teachers and disciples across the ages. The ritualised dialogue modelled in the *Upadesha-sahasri* continues well into the present, in ashramas, temples, lecture halls, and public squares, not only in India but now also in North America and throughout the world.

But how does it help to describe the tradition this way? What is the benefit of this particular vision of Advaita? I believe that there are two useful clarifications that follow from a (re)description of Advaita Vedanta as a practice of ritualised dialogue.

First, it suggests a way past the fruitless debates of an earlier generation, about whether Advaita should be considered as a form of philosophy or a theological system, a religious tradition, a mystical spirituality, or a vision of life. I would contend that Advaita Vedanta is all of these things, but only insofar as it embodies an identity that is more primary, as a teaching, as a path to liberation, as a boat of knowledge consisting above all, of disciplined conversation and dialogue. Joël-André-Michel Dubois's 2014 study of Advaita teaching and learning was entitled *The Hidden Lives of Brahman* in part because he wanted to bring out the hidden reality of Vedanta as it is performed and lived at the great *matha*, monastery, Shringeri.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, I believe that approaching Advaita as a distinctive practice of ritualised dialogue helps us to come to a new appreciation of its uniqueness and complexity, in both the past and the present.

Second, as a specialist in Hindu-Christian studies and a Catholic theologian, I find the commitment to *samvada* that I have discerned in the *Upadesha-sahasri* and witness regularly in the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, the Chinmaya Mission, and many other Advaita movements today a source of great hope.

Certainly, Advaita Vedanta and Catholicism disagree about many things, not least the source and means of final liberation. Acharya Shankara suggests a way to adjudicate these disagreements: *samvada*, conversation, dialogue. And not any conversation, but one that is performed in a way that communicates its seriousness and its great promise. Jesus too engaged in formal practices of dialogue, with Samaritans and others regarded as outsiders in the religious culture he claimed as his own, with Sadducees, Pharisees, and others with whom he disagreed, with his own disciples and even, as I profess by faith, with those of us who continue to follow his path in the contemporary Church. Most Christians affirm that salvation comes through faith, but experience suggests that faith most frequently comes through sustained dialogue.

Still, dialogue does not have the prominence in Catholic tradition that it has in Advaita, nor is it given such central importance in the attainment of divine freedom. Hence, I would suggest that *samvada*, ritualised dialogue, is one of Advaita's great gifts to the spiritual advancement of humankind. We may not agree about religious truth or final liberation, but many of us would still benefit from taking some time to sit at the feet of an Advaita teacher and to learn something about the inestimable value of dialogue. ☪

## References

1. See Reid B Locklin, *Liturgy of Liberation: A Christian Commentary on Shankara's Upadeśasāhasrī* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).
2. Acharya Shankara, *Upadesha Sahasri*, 2.8.1. See *Upadeśa Sāhasrī of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. Swāmi Jagadānanda (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1941).
3. See Joël André-Michel Dubois, *The Hidden Lives of Brahman: Śaṅkara's Vedānta Through His Upaniṣad Commentaries in Light of Contemporary Practice* (New York: State University of New York, 2014).

# *Insights on Reality and Sat-Chit-Ananda— An Advaita Vedanta Perspective*

Chandrasekaran Veeraiah

## **Introduction**

**R**EALITY IS BAFFLING. It escapes human comprehension. ‘The human mind has been, from time immemorial, in the quest of a universal and absolutely certain knowledge of Truth and Reality; and the result has been the emergence of so many systems of philosophy.’<sup>1</sup>

In this light, Acharya Shankara, a mystic and saint, expounded the monistic school of Advaita Vedanta—the school of Hindu thought that propounds that the end of Vedas is non-duality—encapsulating the Hindu’s ‘adventure’ into non-duality. ‘Vedanta is the end or gist of the Vedas.’<sup>2</sup> The Advaita Vedanta of Acharya Shankara means the non-dual Vedanta of Acharya Shankara (ibid.).

‘Reality, according to its [Advaita] insight, is non-dual, not-two.’<sup>3</sup> Despite, inherently employing elaborate and systematic pedagogy and reasoning, Advaita does not profess to formulate conceptually what reality is. It advertently prepares genuine seekers to break asunder the veil of ignorance and to take a plunge into reality. In this attempt ‘It does not reject any view of reality: it only seeks to transcend all views, since these are by their very nature, restricted, limited and circumscribed.’<sup>4</sup>

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Advaita Vedanta conveys the idea of total unity. In short, Advaita Vedanta ‘deals with a philosophy centred around a unity so great, so complete, so basic that all duality is ruled out’.<sup>5</sup> This school of thought asserts that the summum bonum of human existence is the union of individual consciousness with the immutable, non-divisible supreme Brahman.

According to Hindu metaphysics, ‘the Eternal, self-effulgent, Non-dual Absolute Reality called the “Brahman” or “Atman”,’<sup>6</sup> is the attribute-less ultimate reality. Advaita Vedanta indicates that Brahman is of the essence of *sat*, pure Being, *chit*, consciousness or intelligence) and Ananda, bliss or happiness.

According to Reza Shah-Kazemi, ‘since Brahman has been provisionally designated as *Sat-Chit-Ananda*, realization of identity with Brahman must entail bliss as an inseparable concomitant’ (ibid.).

*Satchidananda*, often referred to as *sat-chit-ananda*, a metaphysical concept which is taken from the Upanishads, ‘is the unchanging centre of all manifestation’.<sup>7</sup> Metaphysically, Advaita indicates that *sat-chit-ananda* is the permanent substratum of existence and that the innate reality of human existence essentially is of the nature of transcendental being-ness, *sat*, consciousness, *chit*, and blissfulness, *ananda*. It employs the logic of *neti-vada*, via *negativa*, employing the ‘*neti, neti*’ negating method of ‘it is not this, not that’, leading to *satchidananda*.<sup>8</sup> In the words

of Swami Siddheswarananda, ‘the formula *sac-cidananda* is not a definition but an indication.’<sup>9</sup>

Advaita Vedanta proclaims Brahman as imbued with the essence of *sat-chit-ananda*. Despite the Sanskrit terminologies and concepts employed to give expression to the unexplainable non-dual reality of Brahman, ‘Words are to be used only where language of silence is not understood; but even then, words are not to be taken in their express sense, but as indicators in an implied manner.’<sup>10</sup> The nature of human mind is to seek fulfilment through expression. In this context ‘the teachers of Advaita, recognising this, use words in such a manner that they will lead to the transcendent, without the words insisting that they should go all the way, which they cannot’ (ibid.)

Human language is inadequate to decipher the unknowable, transcendental realities of Advaita Vedanta. ‘All language belongs to the realm of duality ... but the human mind cannot be, and will not be silent; it must express itself in words; it needs must speak even of things which go beyond the reach of words and concepts’ (ibid.). As such, this paper aims to provide a cursory attempt at elucidating the Advaita Vedanta perspective on *sat-chit-ananda* in the context of transcendental reality of Brahman.

### **Sat—Existence or Being**

*Sat* really implies an uncreated existence which is imperishable, timeless and all-pervading, and is the very ground of all other apparent being.<sup>11</sup> *Sat* is Existence, not limited by any systems, structure or substance. It is wholeness, devoid of divisions, immanent and permanent. Advaita indicates that this beingness or *sat*, the unseen metaphysical principle underlying creation, is the bedrock of existence. It proclaims that this uncreated and all-pervading existence is essentially the same, both at microcosmic and

macrocosmic gradations. In the words of Swami Krishnananda, ‘Brahman is Existence which is infinite Consciousness of the nature of Bliss.’<sup>12</sup>

Pure Being is Existence. Existence includes the phenomenal and the transcendent. Advaita posits the concept of pure Being as Atman in the individual human being and Brahman as universal consciousness. The essence in a person and the essence in the Universe are one and the same—and it is ‘“Brahman” ... the Universe has come of “Brahman” and will also return to it.’<sup>13</sup> Conjectures or verbal explanation of *sat* can appease one’s urge to unravel the mysteries of *sat* or being-ness, but ‘logically, attribute or quality itself becomes an unsound concept when it is extended to the Absolute.’<sup>14</sup>

Agnostics are bound to assert that this *sat* is merely an idea in abstraction that bears no semblance to physical reality. Inferentially, *sat* is metaphysical and it defies any comparison or elucidation. Defending the need to exercise a person’s metaphysical imaginative faculties when dwelling on experiential reality and truth, Sri Aurobindo asserts that the ‘supreme truths are neither the rigid conclusions of logical reasoning nor the affirmations of creedal statement, but fruits of the soul’s inner experience.’<sup>15</sup>

According to Advaita, the substratum of existence, including human existence is Being or *sat*. This Being is qualitatively transcendent and immanent or phenomenal. Being is fundamentally inclusive, in terms of a person’s microcosmic existential consciousness and exclusive as the macrocosmic existential consciousness. To this effect, Reza Shah-Kazemi points out that ‘the Absolute, then, must be understood to be real, and thus to “be”, even while it is divested of the relativity entailed by the attribution of Being to it, remembering that whatever is an attribute of the Absolute is not the Absolute, and that, by being attributed to it, Being necessarily



constitutes an attribute of it'.<sup>16</sup> However, Shah-Kazemi indicates that '*Sat* can be *Brahman* inasmuch as no element in the causal chain of being can be divorced from the one Reality, that of *Brahman*; but the converse does not hold: *Brahman* is not reducible to *Sat*' (ibid.).

*Sat* or Pure Being is transcendent yet immanent. All forms are shadows of 'pure Existence', which alone endures in the past, present, and future, while the shadows perish like bubbles in the ocean.<sup>17</sup> The urge to live is the urge just to be, to exist.<sup>18</sup> No one wants not-to-be, everyone wishes to exist, in some form or the other (ibid.). Paradoxically, innate human nature seeks to unravel the mysteries confounding oneself and express them in verbal testimonies. The irony is that Being or *sat* is Reality and it cannot be grasped or expounded. 'The only recourse to be taken is to admit the failure of intellect in determining the nature of Reality and resort to negative propositions.'<sup>19</sup>

Advaita posits pure Being as depicting the absolute transcendent nature of Reality. 'The Absolute transcends all finites, but includes everyone of them. It does not become. It is. ... Existence is the most universal concept which leaves nothing whatsoever outside it' (69). Crediting the ancient rishis or seers for their prophetic Vedantic statements, C Rajagopalachari asserts that 'the Hindu Rishis of yore exhorted humankind to believe that ... the causeless beginning was *Sat* i.e., being with consciousness.'<sup>20</sup> This then leads the discussion into the second aspect of the triadic *sat-chit-ananda*.

### Chit—Consciousness

Advaita Vedanta indicates that 'consciousness or knowledge is the very nature of the Self'.<sup>21</sup> *Chit* or Consciousness is not entirely a single entity, so to speak. It is pure Existence, *sat*, reflecting as pure Consciousness, *chit* or Intelligence.

It is 'existence which is consciousness'.<sup>22</sup> 'The difficulty of language is such that no word can be used at all to designate what *Sat-Cit* means. They are not two different things or states. It is Being which is Consciousness; or Consciousness which is Being. Being is Consciousness, and Consciousness is Being' (ibid.)

Consciousness presupposes intelligence as what is identified as consciousness has to inherently display an awareness, which is pure Awareness. However, this does not mean that it is a subject and it needs to be conscious about something outside as an object. *Chit* is exclusivity and inclusivity. 'Consciousness in the sense of Reality does not imply that outside it something must exist as its object. It is only in empirical cognition that consciousness needs an object' (71). This reinforces *Aitareya Upanishad's* aphoristic dictum, '*Prajnanam brahma*; Brahman is Consciousness'.<sup>23</sup> 'Consciousness cannot be conscious of Consciousness, even as one cannot climb on one's own shoulders. Eternal consciousness is Being itself.'<sup>24</sup>

Advaita finds that Consciousness is devoid of intentionality. There is no volition as Consciousness is self-luminous and not compelled to act. 'However, consciousness becomes intentional because of its association with the mind and senses' (71). Advaita posits that mind and senses are outward-bound and externalises interiority, thus strengthening the experience of duality. For earthly existence, a person's intelligence mingles with the mind and the senses and projects reality in the externals, thus creating an intention for action. In this context, Advaita asserts that 'when the mind and senses, which are the external adjuncts, are absent, consciousness remains in its pure and uninvolved state' (73).

Taking a deeper insight into the essence of *chit*, Advaita looks at the individualised consciousness in human existence as operating via three

states—the waking, dream, and the deep-sleep states. ‘The whole world is objectively busy, and therefore, Brahman is unknown to the world. We are always conscious of something other than the Self, both in the waking and the dreaming consciousness. It is only in deep sleep that we practically become one with the Absolute’ (ibid.). ‘At the deep-sleep level, where the mind is in its causal or latent state, consciousness remains pure and undifferentiated. At the absolute level or *paramarthika* level, consciousness is pure, non-intentional and non-relational. It simply is.’<sup>25</sup>

In the scheme of Existence, Consciousness cannot be a separate quality or entity. Krishnananda says, it is *sat-chit*, a united whole.<sup>26</sup> Advaita is emphatic on this and the Upanishadic aphorism ‘*Prajñanam brahma*; Brahman is Consciousness’ lends credence to this. ‘Pure Consciousness (*cit*) is beyond all forms of experience and yet, all the perceptions of our daily life associate and mingle intimately with the consciousness of “I am”, says Siddheswarananda.’<sup>27</sup> This brings the discussion to the third aspect of ananda, bliss, or unalloyed happiness.

### **Ananda—Bliss**

Advaita propounds that consciousness presupposes existence and existence incorporates bliss. ‘Existence (*Sat*) which is Consciousness (*Cit*) itself is Bliss (*Ananda*).’<sup>28</sup> Principally, even the pursuit of lower levels of worldly happiness, joy, or bliss is generally said to be a misdirected effort at pursuing unlimited joyfulness. ‘While dualistic worldly bliss is lower, it is measure of, and points to, the inherent non-dual bliss of brahman.’<sup>29</sup>

That innate human need to feel fulfilled at all levels of mundane or phenomenal existence is self-evident in all human pursuits, even in the search for the noumenal. The noted German philosopher Paul Deussen finds that ‘in the Upanishads bliss appears not as an attribute or a state of

Brahman, but as his peculiar essence ... Brahman is not *Anandin*, possessing bliss, but *Ananda*, bliss itself.’<sup>30</sup> The elements of Existence, Consciousness, and Bliss seem to be seen as inseparable from the whole gamut of existence. Kaji is concordant in asserting that ‘the urges to exist, to be conscious, and to be happy, permanently and without limitation, are universal and instinctive for all human beings everywhere and at all times.’<sup>31</sup> He continues to stress that they ‘are natural and do not have to be learnt or copied from others. It does not seem reasonable to dismiss them as invalid or incapable of fulfilment’ (ibid.).

Advaita Vedanta finds that every phenomenal activity or action that a person undertakes is intrinsically one that is undertaken in the pursuit of joy, happiness, or bliss, however misdirected it might be. In this context, phenomenal existence projects different shades of reality. Siddheswarananda finds that the ‘Reality never ceases to be present in each entity of the phenomenal universe. The appearances of the sensory world are only the refraction or condensation of Pure Being, seen in terms of *Ananda*.’<sup>32</sup> However, Advaita enjoins that one needs to understand, through inquiry, the difference between unitive supreme Reality and the evanescent, ever-changing forms of multiplicity. ‘The surging movement that arises, continues and completes its cycle by engulfing all forms of empirical existence in Pure Bliss, the Supreme Love (*ananda*), but the spectator tastes the fullness of it only when the differences, distinctions arising out of multiplicity are all wiped out’ (212).

In the context of human pursuit of happiness or bliss, the crucial issue of effort and effortlessness needs to be understood in its proper perspective. ‘Anything that involves effort, anything that involves change, anything which is becoming something other than what we already are can never be a solution.’<sup>33</sup> The human mind is always

in search of ever expanding or infinite happiness. 'We learn from our experiences with things of the external world that we will never achieve infinite and eternal *sat*, *chit*, and *ananda* by our finite and time-bound efforts. Efforts can take us a long way and are absolutely, essential for several preparatory matters, but can never take us to the boundless and to the unchanging' (73). Advaita postulates that unalloyed happiness or bliss happens only when duality ceases. It forsakes becoming and propounds the idea of being-ness. Its shining truth is 'that the true nature of our own self is *sat*, *chit*, and *ananda* here and now for every one of us. This is the only possibility which excludes any effort, any change, any becoming—because what can be required to become what we already are?' (ibid.).

Happiness is the state of the mind while Bliss is the quality of the Being. Explaining Acharya Shankara's Advaitic perspective on bliss, Krishnananda, quoting the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 7.23.1, asserts that the 'great Infinite alone is Bliss, there is no bliss in the small finite'.<sup>34</sup> He goes on to add that 'the world appears to be real, intelligent and blissful, because it projects itself on the background of something which is essentially Reality-Intelligence-Bliss' (ibid.) In this context, Advaita Vedanta exhorts one to have a clear understanding of reality and realise that the inherent quality of the Atman or the embodied self is Brahman which is infinite Being, infinite Consciousness, and infinite Bliss.

This sums up the Advaitic view on bliss as one which is an inherent and inseparable essence of Brahman. It cannot be seen in isolation. Essentially, Being is Consciousness exuding Bliss. When 'later Advaitins define *brahman* in the positive, as undifferentiated, pure consciousness or Being-Consciousness-Bliss (*sat-cit-ānanda*), they are following Śaṅkara's essential description of *brahman* in not taking *sat-cit-ānanda* "to be

three different descriptions or three properties predicated of *brahman*, but rather as the unitary essence of the undifferentiated absolute".<sup>35</sup>

Advaita Vedanta emphasises that the actions or activities undertaken by the embodied self is nothing but an innate urge to express its expanse and freedom and unfold its nature as supreme knowledge, supreme consciousness, and supreme bliss. It posits that Bliss is not one that can be pursued but a person is essentially endowed with the essence of bliss. It conclusively asserts that Self or Atman is enlightened and blissful by nature.

### Conclusion

Advaita Vedanta, propounded by Acharya Shankara, is not a futile exercise in argumentation, speculation, or negation. It is an invitation to an experiential mode of one's identity with the cosmos—the identity of the individual soul, Atman, to the supreme Soul, Brahman. The physical human existence, surrounded by the ensnaring natural forces outside and the enslaving microcosmic constitutional inhibitions resulting from the operations of the mind, intellect, and the ego, will not stay contented with puny pleasures and joyful endeavours during one's lifespan. A human being is always seeking for expansion and merger into the expansive ethereal dimensions not bound by time, space, and causation. It is based on this truth that the Vedas proclaimed human beings as the offspring of immortality, worthy of higher dimensions and merger.

Advaita propounds that the personalised self and its concordant projection of personalities have blurred the human faculties to see through the delusional darkness created by *maya*, a concept that Advaita explains as depicting the energy field that is perpetually at work to keep the entire microcosmic and macrocosmic elements evolving through its dynamic force. Relying on

Vedic and Upanishadic scriptural authorities, mainly on the *prasthanas-trayi*, the triple texts, namely the Upanishads, the *Brahma Sutra*, and the Bhagavadgita, Advaita attempts to propose an embryonic methodology via its uncompromising theory of monism.

Shankara's monistic school posits its cardinal theory that 'there is one Absolute Brahman who is Sat-chit-Ananda, who is of an absolutely homogenous nature'.<sup>36</sup> Advaita does not negate the existence of the world but maintains that the 'appearance of the world is due to Maya—the illusory power of Brahman which is neither Sat nor Asat' (ibid.).

Advaita Vedanta indicates that the triadic aspect of Brahman, *sat-chit-ananda*, is fundamentally not a quality but Reality—the essence of Brahman. They are not separate entities, so to speak, but a conglomeration of unitive existence. *Chit* or bliss is the innate reality of Being or Existence. It is Brahman. Swami Krishnananda, points out that 'Brahman is Existence which is infinite Consciousness of the nature of Bliss'.<sup>37</sup> 'Existence which is Consciousness, itself is Bliss' (65). In reassuring words, Mahadevan concludes, 'it is not that the self has consciousness or is blissful; the self is consciousness-bliss'.<sup>38</sup>


Using human language, which is basically inadequate, Advaita Vedanta has codified its teachings to exhort serious seekers to unravel the mysteries of the unknowable. 'Even thus, it is not proper to regard the self's nature as constituted of three factors, being-consciousness-bliss. Language is here useful, not in describing what is real or what is value, but in drawing us away from what is non-real and what is non-value' (Ibid.). It treats creation as a process not an end and 'the creative activity of God is the overflow of joy'.<sup>39</sup>

The unfailing adherent of Advaita Vedanta and Hindu sage, Swami Vivekananda, explains in his lecture on the Vedanta philosophy delivered

before the Graduate Philosophical Society of Harvard University on 25 March 1896: 'The Advaitist says, this little personalised self is the cause of all misery. This individualised self, which makes me different from all other beings, brings hatred and jealousy and misery, struggle and all other evils...So when the Vedantist has realised his own nature, the whole world has vanished for him. It will come back again, but no more the same world of misery. The prison of misery has become changed into *Sat, Chit, Ananda* – Existence Absolute, Knowledge Absolute, Bliss Absolute – and the attainment of this is the goal of the Advaita Philosophy'.<sup>40</sup>

Conclusively, Advaita surmises that the triadic *sat-chit-ananda*, which reflects Existence or Reality, is a unitive force, both immanent and transcendent and is Brahman or Reality's innate nature. In this context, relying mainly on Upanishadic revelations, Advaita Vedanta propounded a methodology to guide the embodied human existence to claim one's rightful status as the offspring of immortality, unveiling the principles of Brahman, Atman, maya, and moksha or release. It has provided an unfailing, systematic methodology of precise reasoning leading individual beings to unitive mergence into Reality. While Advaita attempts to express these fundamentals in intelligible language patterns, its exhilaration at touching the essence cannot be expressed but in silence.

Reality or in Advaitic parlance, Brahman, is the unknowable. 'This is the important thing to understand: however hard we may try, we could never succeed in placing Reality in front of us as a specimen to be analysed'.<sup>41</sup> Reality is only understood, so to say, using the faculty of higher intuition and in that state, fundamentally, there is no perceiver, the act of perceiving, or the perceived. Advaita Vedanta negates duality at all levels and modes and lets the seeker unravel life's mystery.

The skilful use of limiting language in capturing the significance of silence advocated by Advaita can be better understood through the words of the eminent Western philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: 'My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognises them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed upon it.). He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.'<sup>42</sup> 

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# Advaita Vedanta in the Hands of Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Bharatwaj Iyer

## Introduction

RUSMIR MAHMUTĆEHAJIĆ writes: ‘As such, the openness of the self and the world to Unicity make it possible for different languages, meanings and symbols to speak of Reality in another manner.’<sup>1</sup> The historian and philosopher of Indian Philosophy, Daya Krishna in his seminal text *Indian Philosophy: A Counter Perspective* makes the very cogent point that the conventional way of studying and presenting Indian thought, as divided neatly into the orthodox and heterodox schools, is unhistorical and results in overlooking the distinctness or uniqueness of the individual thinkers that are subsumed under the school’s broader rubric. It also leads, he maintains, to the ossification of our perspective of the history of ideas in India because the framework makes us look for continuity and sameness in this history rather than for discontinuous creativity and variety.<sup>2</sup>

One might ask whether Daya Krishna’s critique still holds water; one might ask if recent studies in the history of Indian Philosophy continue in this error. Be that as it may, one could at least agree that Daya Krishna’s warning against treating Indian thought in this way is well worth keeping in mind. This essay heeds this warning. But in doing so, it attempts to go way further than Daya Krishna.

In studying the tradition of Advaita Vedanta and analysing the long history of debates, commentaries, and elucidations revolving around it, is it necessary, for instance, that we look only within the formal institutional tradition established by Acharya Shankara? If so, where exactly ought we to put the tremendous mystical and philosophical output of the doctrinally divergent sixteenth century Advaitin Appaya Dikshita? Or ought we to restrict our gaze within the medieval and late medieval periods? What then should we do with the unique and diverse Advaitic syntheses worked out by Sri Ramakrishna or Swami Vivekananda or Sri Aurobindo, who flourished in the broad daylight of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?

In search of our revered Advaitic teachers and commentators ought we to contain ourselves within the Indian tradition? If so, what are we to do with the fact that Schopenhauer’s metaphysical system comes strikingly close to the Advaitic one, which he himself points out in the preface to his *The World as Will and Representation*?<sup>3</sup> Also, how do we square the fact that Swamiji repeatedly uses Immanuel Kant’s metaphysical division of reality into phenomena and noumena, employing constantly what is now called the Kantian Boundary in order to explore the central tenets of Advaita Vedanta? This is clear, to take but one example, in his introduction to *Jnana Yoga*,<sup>4</sup> which is arguably the most distilled and cogently argued exposition of non-dualism in his whole oeuvre.

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Kant, of course, never explicitly spoke about Vedanta like Schopenhauer did. But we understand and express better the principles of Advaita, and the rationality that upholds and undergirds it, by allowing this Kantian intervention. Doesn't this make Kant an important figure in the history of Advaita Vedanta? The twentieth century philosopher K C Bhattacharya couldn't have erected his vast and rather intricate system of metaphysics, phenomenology, and psychology without a rereading of Advaita using the lens provided by Kant. All of this must compel us to think about the very meaning of Advaita and the Advaitic tradition.

The answer to the above string of questions depends on how we define the contours of Advaita as a philosophical system. I here take Swamiji's view, which is so finely portrayed in Stephen Gregg's recent book, *Swami Vivekananda and Non-Hindu Traditions*, as one that bases its 'Advaitic primacy' in the 'universal human religious condition'.<sup>5</sup> In this view, non-dualism is not just a spiritual school or tradition or method. It is all of that but is also more than that, Gregg argues. It is an attitude towards reality, a frame of reference, a peculiar form of envisioning the world, no matter the variety of ways in which this attitude is solidified in theory and praxis.

A universal Advaita, to use Gregg's phrase, will have to be unsystematic in itself but amenable to systematisation depending on the cultural and intellectual atmosphere in which it is handled. The number of teachers and commentators of this universal Advaita and the diverse traditions from which they hail are bound to be considerably expanded. But a caveat is here important. We are not putting together a perennial philosophy of the type that Aldous Huxley did. Mysticism has its place, but our concern in this study shall be the intellectual route to the Absolute, our concern shall be with systematic

philosophy, of which the mystical experience is but the phenomenological and experiential side. This is as much as to say that our chosen path here is jnana, knowledge.

Let us add one more to the string of questions in our second paragraph. Do we have to restrict ourselves only to Hinduism? One might complain that this whole stage-setting introduction is unneeded. No one has claimed that Advaita be limited to either India or Hinduism, to either the past or the present, to either the West or the East. Yet, this overlooks the scope and seriousness of the questions raised. What these questions are asking in effect is this. Could someone like Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), a philosopher and historian of Islamic philosophy and an ecological thinker, who has both drawn immensely from Vedanta and contributed to it in return, ever be made part of a general summary of the history of Vedantic thought? Only when we think along these lines do we see really how difficult and paradoxical is any universalist project really. This paper will attempt to do just that; it shall attempt to introduce Seyyed Hossein Nasr as a teacher of Advaita Vedanta both in the general sense of having a non-dualist vision or intellectual attitude and in the particular sense of using and moulding the Advaita tradition as passed down from Acharya Shankara.

### ***Shedding Ink for the Sacred: His Life and Works***

Seyyed Hossein Nasr is an Iranian Islamic philosopher, historian, and ecological thinker. Born to a family of scholars in the year 1933 in Tehran, he was introduced to poetry, philosophy, literature, and indeed, science at a very early age. In his conversation with Ramin Jahanbegloo,<sup>6</sup> he relates how he was immersed in the Persian poets Rumi, Hafez, and Firdawsi in early childhood. Around the age of ten, he was already engaging

with Pascal and Descartes in Persian translation. His father's broad and open outlook meant that the young Seyyed Hossein was introduced to both Islamic and Western texts and thinkers.

In 1945 he left Iran for the United States where he pursued his education further. However, it is interesting to note that before that, for his fourth grade he went to Jamshid Jam Zoroastrian School. For the fifth and sixth grades he went to schools where there seems to have been a lively and open intellectual culture. This both explains the breath of mind and openness of heart that Seyyed Hossein Nasr's very mode of thinking displays in later life, and especially in matters of religious and cultural distinctions and differences. Anyway, for our purposes here, these are useful facts. Around this time, he was also introduced to Mahatma Gandhi, whom his father regarded as a great role model to follow in life (24).

First a student of Physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), he quickly shifted to philosophy and that remains to this day his field of excellence. The reason for the shift was his perception of the fact that the whole enterprise of modern science is founded on certain presuppositions that, themselves not amenable to proof, need to axiomatically be accepted for the enterprise to get going in the first place. These presuppositions are the subject of metaphysics and epistemology rather than theoretical science. His books like *Man and Nature, Knowledge and the Sacred, Science and Civilization in Islam*, are excellent examples of his work in the philosophy of science.<sup>7</sup>

There are two broad areas where Dr Nasr's influence is significant. One is the realm of Islamic philosophy, where he is both a prominent teacher and historical exponent, with contributions of his own as an original thinker. The other realm is that of perennial philosophy, where he

is a part of a galaxy of prominent intellectual figures, with a vision of reality at once universalist and traditionalist, like René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, James Cutsinger, and so on. Apart from these two, there is another area, overlapping with them, where his contributions have had immense impact: ecological theology and philosophy. In fact, he is arguably among the first thinkers to bring to the ecological crisis a solution, and preceding that a diagnosis, wholly anchored in the spirit and letter of traditionalist spirituality and metaphysics, thereby founding a veritable theosophy of nature.

### ***The Sacred, the Unifier***

We have been using terms that might require some elucidation to prevent misunderstanding. By 'tradition' or 'traditionalist' in the perennialist school is meant a perspective that considers all the dispensations from the dimension of the sacred as being equally authentic, salvific, and true. This is the reason that in the last paragraph, the apparently contrary terms 'traditional' and 'universalist' were juxtaposed. We spoke earlier about the foundation of science being certain philosophical presuppositions, paradigms, *darshanas*, or views or visions of reality.

It is the teaching of the traditionalist school, also Latinised as *philosophia perennis*, that the rise of the modern world coincided with the dropping from importance of the intellect or *aql*, and the reduction of the human epistemic potential to mere *ratio*. The intellect was subsumed under mere rationality. The intellect can best be understood in comparison with the Sankhya concept of *buddhi*. Paul Schweizer, of the University of Edinburgh, explains that the *buddhi* in the Sankhya system stands for a reflective sieve, through whose sattvic transparency the light of consciousness, the Purusha principle, shines



on the objects, causing cognition to take place.<sup>8</sup> The cognitive faculties of the human being are indeed also involved in rational activities, organising and presenting thoughts, but they can do this only because of their connection to the seat of pure consciousness and pure subjectivity, Purusha. The intellect is best described by Nasr as follows:

The Logos or *Buddhi* or 'aql', as the Intellect is called in various traditions, is the luminous center which is the generating agent of the world—for 'it was by the Word that all things were made'—of man, and of religion. It is God's knowledge of Himself and the first in His creation. Moreover, as there is a hierarchy of cosmic existence, so are there levels of consciousness and degrees of descent of the Intellect through various levels of existence until man is reached, in whose heart the ray of Intellect still shines.<sup>9</sup>

Modernity, achieved by the irreparable Cartesian split between the subject and the object, brought about with it the corollary split between knowledge and being. About the latter, we shall be discussing further. The split, however, resulted in the dethroning of the intellect as a luminous centre of consciousness deriving its cognitive potency from the transcendent. Instead, the intellect, or what Nasr also terms as *buddhi*, was reduced to a mathematical and logical tool with which the human being could manipulate and control its environment after forcing nature to reveal her secrets. This modern predicament ultimately leads to the viewing of Nature herself as nothing more than what Heidegger called a *Bestand* or standing reserve, a vast storehouse of cognitive and material resources.

The breaking of the tie between the human heart and the Transcendent, caused by reducing the human intellect, and with it the human being as well, into a manipulative tool bent on self-aggrandisement is also according to Nasr the cause

of most of the ills of modern life—extending all the way from psychological, sociological, and ecological catastrophes to spiritual calamities that the world is currently labouring under. The way out of the problem of course is exactly the way into it.

Taking the ecological catastrophe first, it is the view of nature as a storehouse of intellectual and natural resources, instead of as a manifestation of the Transcendent and Sacred, that resulted in its maltreatment and which is likely to destroy it. The solution is to view nature as an ensemble of God's signs or *ayat*. Indeed, in the Sufi understanding of Nature, the cosmos itself is conceived as a Quran. Henry Corbin considers the notion of the Cosmic Script or the Cosmic Quran as an important aspect of Sufi hermeneutics. The Quran states this conception in the fifty-third verse of chapter forty-one, which reads: 'We shall show them Our signs in every region of the earth [on the far horizons] and in themselves, until it becomes clear to them that this is the Truth. Is it not enough that your Lord witnesses everything?'<sup>10</sup>

The far horizons and the depths of the self are signs from God. 'Far horizon', which is the translation of the Arabic '*afaq*', and the 'selves', translated from '*anfus*' which is the plural of '*nafs*', combine in this verse to form the two cosmic polarities over which God is the witness. We here also get the Vedantic triad of the Atman, *nafs*, *jagat*, the universe or *afaq*, and Brahman, *allah*, or *al-haqq*. It is here that, according to Seyyed Hossein Nasr,<sup>11</sup> all the traditional cosmologies come together in their vision of nature. And it is in their recovery that ecological survival depends.

The catastrophes that have impacted both the conception of human nature and of knowledge stem also from the same severance of the intellect's link with the Sacred. With the advent of

scientific modernity, the human capacity for envisioning the ultimate reality was substituted with a human incapacity that restricts us to the merely calculative and organisational, with the changing and the ephemeral. As Nasr puts it in his *Living Sufism*: 'Man, who during the Renaissance considered himself a secular being, began to develop a science that considered the changing aspect of things alone, a science that was concerned solely with becoming rather than being.'<sup>12</sup> The confinement of knowledge and its possibilities to that which is transient and changing, what is measurable and can be manipulated has led to 'the destruction of the immutable aspect of both man and Universe' (ibid.).

Guénon in his *The Reign of Quantity* considers this materialist and reductionist paradigm as being blinded to one aspect of things and focused entirely on the other.<sup>13</sup> It focusses on the quantitative at the expense of the qualitative, the substantive at the expense of the essential, the material at the expense of the formal. The ability to look at both these aspects at the very same time is an important contribution that both Advaita Vedanta and Sufi metaphysics, as we shall see, can make to solve our present global predicament.

The point that these perennial cosmologists and philosophers are making, Seyyed Hossein Nasr especially among them, is that despite external differences, in these core and deeper matters, in these esoteric aspects, all the authentic spiritual traditions in the world are united, for their source is the same. The more inward the aspect we are looking at, the closer the religious traditions! Martin Lings, in his *What is Sufism*, describes this using the symbol of a circle.<sup>14</sup>

### **Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Jnana Yoga**

In the second verse of his *Atmabodha*, 'Self-Knowledge', Acharya Shankara has this to say

about the salvific role of spiritual knowledge or *bodha*: 'Just as fire is the direct cause for cooking, so knowledge is the direct means of liberation. Compared to all other forms of discipline, knowledge or *jnana* is the only direct means of liberation.'<sup>15</sup>

In his most important text on this subject written in 1989, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr considers this liberating form of knowledge to be Sapiential Wisdom, *bikmat al-khalida*, or in Latin, *Scientia Sacra*. This sacred science allows the intellect to see things as they are, without superimposition or false ascription. Indeed, in the fourth verse of the *Atmabodha*, Acharya Shankara says that the Self—the imminent self that is non-different from the transcendent self—shows itself as itself. The form of knowledge here is that of *prakasha* or illumination.

What is prerequisite for this is the removal of ignorance, and as ignorance is a negative thing, a mere non-substantial *adhyasa*, a false ascription of being on to that which has no being, what this means is that there is but a need for a shift in one's vision of reality. Reality doesn't need change, it doesn't need adjustment, it just needs to be viewed properly, and knowledge will shine forth. In this, Sufism is in total concurrence. Mansoor al-Hallaj says, and Nasr translates it from the text of Ibn al-Arif's *Mahasin al-Majalis*, 'Thou art the veil which hides from thine heart the secret of His mystery.'<sup>16</sup> Meister Eckhart put this idea in his advice to strip 'yourself of your own self'.<sup>17</sup> It is when the Atman is not ignorantly viewed as a finite self that its infinity is revealed. Indeed, that which is veiled, or is the object of *adhyasa*, is verily the same as that which veils.<sup>18</sup>

Seyyed Hossein Nasr formulates this quintessentially Advaitic idea thus: 'Intelligence is a divine gift which pierces through the veil of *māyā*

and is able to know reality as such. It is a ray of light which pierces through the veils of cosmic existence to the Origin and connects the periphery of existence, upon which fallen man lives, to the Center wherein resides the Self.<sup>19</sup> This piercing ability of the intellect is called *viveka*, the faculty which discerns between the true and the false, the real and the apparent, the relative and the absolute. In short, it is the instrument of knowing a thing for what it is.<sup>20</sup> To quote Nasr again: 'Discrimination between the Real and the unreal terminates in the awareness of the nondual nature of the Real, the awareness which is the heart of gnosis and which represents not human knowledge but God's knowledge of Himself.'<sup>21</sup>

In his commentary on the Bhagavadgita, Acharya Shankara explains the nature of superimposition and the way out of it: 'The mundane state, consisting of agentship and enjoyership pertaining to the objects of knowledge, is superimposed on the knower through ignorance. ... Since ignorance has the nature of covering, it is indeed a notion born of *tamas*; it makes one perceive contrarily, or it arouses doubt, or it leads to non-perception. For it disappears with the dawn of discrimination.'<sup>22</sup>

It is very interesting in this comparative analysis of ours to note that Acharya Shankara regards ignorance as a form of veiling. To the Advaitin, *khyati*<sup>23</sup> or falsity in cognition doesn't have any positive reality nor a temporally identifiable cause. It is a beginning-less condition of being itself. It is not a positive reality in the sense that ignorance is merely the seeing of a thing as it is not, it is to ascribe reality to what isn't real. Yes, the snake, which is a *khyati*, is a covering or veil over the rope, which is the real. Yet, the snake is the rope, the false is the real, the veil is the veiled if only one could shift one's vision. Because the problem is that of false ascription, or superimposition, *adhyasa*, the solution must

be the removal of this superimposition, the false and the true must be broken separate from each other, before you can realise that they were non-different to begin with. As Nasr puts it: 'He has realized that ultimately *Māyā* is *Ātman*.'<sup>24</sup> This task is that of *viveka*.<sup>25</sup>

Acharya Shankara defines *viveka*, discernment, as the ability to discern the Self from the non-Self or the being from the non-being (71). Every student of Advaitic epistemology must however be aware of the startling paradox involved here. This paradox is captured most succinctly by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in his *The Need for a Sacred Science*: 'If a critic asserts, as in fact has been done, that according to this or that Oriental sage *māyā* is *Ātman* or *samsāra* is *nirvana*, one can answer that such an assertion is only possible if one first realizes that *māyā* is *māyā* and *samsāra* is *samsāra*.'<sup>26</sup>

One has to inevitably begin with *maya*, with the relative, with the non-self. That becomes the ground on which discernment must work. In his *Living Sufism*, Nasr says something much more radical, while beautifully bringing together the Vedantic and the Islamic conception of this: 'To have understood that the world is *maya* is to have understood the meaning of *Atman* or *Brahman*, which transcends *maya* ... the very realisation of the character of the world as *al-khalq* implies the awareness of *al-haqq*.'<sup>27</sup>

There is no way out of that. It must be like that if one's conception is Advaitic or non-dualistic. Knowing the one must mean knowing the other, for there is only one. The relative must be known as relative, as dependent on the Absolute, and not as irreducibly final or we risk making the relative into an absolute, which is logically impossible. On the other hand, our aim is indeed to say that the relative is the absolute, that *maya* is *Brahman*. This must come, as Nasr says, after first considering the relative as relative and the absolute as absolute.

So, the intellect and its capacity for discernment, for piercing through the veil or hijab of cosmic existence and reaching the truth beyond is the fundamental starting point, and at this point Vedanta and Islam are united in their goals and intent. The failure of modernity also consists in the divorce between epistemology and ontology, between knowledge and being. One of the other functions of the intellect, the losing of which Nasr laments, is the recognition of a qualitative hierarchy of knowledge, attendant on a qualitative hierarchy of existence. This latter will take us into the metaphysical constructions of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) and Sadr ad-Din Shirazi (1571–1640), who are crucial to Nasr's intellectual development and thereby also crucial to his understanding of Advaita Vedanta.

### The Nature of Reality

Before we can introduce Seyyed Hossein Nasr's presentation of Advaita Vedanta and explore a dimension which hasn't been explored before—that is, the situating of Nasr's interpretation of Advaita within the matrix of the concepts of *wahdat al-wujud*, transcendent unity of Existence, and *tashkik al-wujud*, the gradation of Existence—we need first to go over some Advaitic metaphysical grounds that need not be new but are essential. Let us begin with an Islamic source.

A hadith *qudsi* is a hadith or prophetic saying that is placed on his tongue by God, and so such hadiths are almost, but not quite, equal to the Quran in their importance. One such hadith, which is fundamental to the Sufi tradition, goes: 'I was a hidden treasure and I wanted to be known, therefore I created the world.'<sup>28</sup> What this hadith is suggesting, and what the Sufi philosophical tradition took from it, is that God is manifesting his own Self through the cosmos, and in the case of Self-knowledge or realisation, it is God who is knowing God.

Coupled with this hadith, one also needs to consider the twenty-sixth verse of chapter fifty-five of the Quran which reads: 'Everything thereon is passing away (*fān*); and there subsists (*yabqā*) only the Face of your Lord, Owner of Majesty and Glory.'<sup>29</sup> Reza Shah-Kazemi in his book discussing the commonalities between Islam and Buddhism presents us the theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's interpretation of this verse. Ghazali twists the verse a little into meaning that everything, *kulli shay*, is by nature perishing, non-existent, unreal except his face which is present in everything, which is the only real in the cosmos. So, to know a thing or to know the Self is to know his face. With this comparative reflection, we can now go to Advaita Vedanta.

Patrick Laude when discussing the concepts of Atman and Brahman views the former as the supremely subjective and the latter as the absolutely objective. This translation of the problem into the Subject-Object poles, and then the subsequent equation of these poles is very useful. For in Advaita, ultimate reality is either Existence, *sat*, or Consciousness, *chit*, and both. The Vedantic tradition has evolved teaching methodologies that either focus on the ontological or the epistemological side of things, both arriving at the same point.

The Hindu—and specifically Advaitin—notation of *Māyā* may be approached from a variety of perspectives that ultimately involve either an ontological, or an epistemological emphasis. It could be said that, in principle, the first approach pertains to a metaphysical description of reality, or the doctrinal dimension of Advaita, whereas the second is mostly relevant to the 'subjective' realm of method, or the way of spiritual realization.<sup>30</sup>

Interestingly, in our search for the Object we realise that the Object, the ultimately Real in its objective metaphysical mode, cannot be reached

through reaching particular objects. Indeed, we find something even more radical. When we go looking for them, we actually find it impossible to reach particular objects either! Take a pot for instance. The pot itself is not a substantial entity but merely a shape and a name given to the clay that underlies and substantiates it; it is merely pot-shaped clay. Look at how the noun quickly turned into an adjective.

Now, what about the clay? It too is but the name given to certain shapes and formations that the underlying molecules have assumed. Does the clay exist on top of or in substantial addition to the molecular formation? No. It is just clay-shaped molecules, if the expression is allowed. The same with the molecules, which are nothing more than certain combinations of the underlying atoms. So, when I take hold of a pot, is it the atomic structure that is real and which I name 'pot'? No, for even here one can go down to the subatomic structure, to the world of quantum reality and, if the string theorists are right, down even to strings as the ultimate substrate of reality, as the Object.

But one cannot logically halt in this analysis. Anything that has a form is the form of something underlying it. To avoid this infinite regress, the final substance underlying everything must be formless. It must have an existence without requiring something underlying it, something supporting it to give it existence and reality. That which fulfils this condition is Existence itself. What in Sanskrit we call *sat* and which in Islamic philosophy is called, in Arabic, *al-Wujud*.

The same analysis can be done to the other side of the polarity set up by Patrick Laude: the Subject. Indeed, one of the cardinal texts of the Vedanta tradition, *drig-drishya-viveka* or the Seer-Seen-Discernment, does just that. Just as the Object cannot be a particular object or set of objects, the Subject cannot be a particular

manifestation of subjectivity. The *viveka* we need here is that we keep in mind that a subject is that which cannot be objectified. It is straightforward logic, even a useful tautology, to say that subject is not an object; it cannot be objectified, and if it is objectified it becomes an object and that which is doing the objectification becomes the subject instead.

Suppose there is an eye that is seeing a rock. Here, the eye is the subject and the rock is the perceptive or cognitive object. But the eye is not the Subject because it too can be cognitively objectified, say by the mind which can think about it. The mind also is not the Subject because in the case of self-reflection, the mind becomes an object of cognition. As in the case of the object, here too one risks entering an infinite regress, unless we reach the very floor of pure consciousness which is the subject of every perception, every cognition, every act of understanding without itself becoming the object of cognition. Whatever faculty cognises it then, gets the mantle of the Subject; we are not concerned about who gets this mantle, whatever that final cognisant is—that is pure consciousness. Advaita's teaching is the finding of final unity between this Object and this Subject, and the recognition of the joy or ananda<sup>31</sup> that results from it.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr's texts like *The Garden of Truth*, *Three Muslim Sages*, and *Sadr ad-Din Shirazi and His Transcendent Theosophy* make it clear that his own philosophical views and his understanding of Vedanta depend on Ibn Arabi's notion of *Wahdat al-Wujud* and Sadra's notion of *Tashkik al-Wujud*.<sup>32</sup> The former notion is the result of taking the Islamic testimony, 'there is no God but God', to its logical extreme. *Tawhid* or Unity is the declaration of God's oneness, of the uniqueness of God's divinity. But to Ibn Arabi, it also means the declaration of his unique Reality, considering God as the only

Real. Everything else receives its reality or its existence, *wujud*, from the only *Wujud* that there is. William Chittick, the foremost expert on Ibn Arabi, puts it comprehensively: '*Tawhid* is expressed most succinctly in the formula, "There is no god but God." God is *wujud*, so "There is no *wujud* but God." Everything other than God is not *wujud* and can properly be called "nonexistence" (*'adam*). *Wujud* is the Hidden Treasure, and all things derive their existence from it, for they possess none of their own.'<sup>33</sup>

In a sense, there is nothing but un-objectified pure Being or Existence. Everything is nothing but this *Wujud*, even disparate entities that act as veils of this pure Being. As Ibn Arabi puts it in his *Risalat al-Ahadiyah*, Treatise on Unity: 'None sees Him other than He, and none perceives Him other than He. His veil is [only a "consequence" and effect of] His oneness; nothing veils other than He. ... His prophet is He, and His sending is He, and His Word is He. He sent Himself with Himself to Himself.'<sup>34</sup>

There is however a risk in this, which students of Advaita also must be wary of. One can, by deprecating the relative for the absolute, enter a position of implicit duality. Seyyed Hossein Nasr pre-empts this error in his commentary on the above passage; and in fact, his Vedantic analysis also never falls into that mistake. He is helped in this by the view of the cosmos as a Divine Theophany, which is a common theme across Sufism. Nasr says: 'What Ibn Arabi wishes to assert is that the Divine Reality is distinguished from its manifestations and is transcendent with respect to them, but that the manifestations are not in every respect separate from the Divine Reality which somehow encompasses them' (ibid.).

Therefore, maya can never be regarded as sheer illusion, appearance as purely false, the unreal as a total nullity. For that would mean setting up an independent and equal principle as

against God, while we just saw that 'there is no *wujud* but God'. The world cannot be independent of God; indeed, it has no reality whatsoever apart from being a reflection or borrowing of God's reality. In less theistic terms this is exactly what we saw above in the pot analysis. There is no substantial or additional and independent reality to the various forms that the underlying substance assumes. The only reality that they have is adjectival, formal, qualitative. Here our Vedantic analysis meets at the very heart of Ibn Arabi's Sufism.

It is the qualities and acts of God that are reflected in the world. God is the repository of all the qualities and properties that this manifold world displays, and every quality in the world reflects God's attributes. Here is the right place to mention that Islamic philosophy begins with a fundamental ontological distinction. In its analysis, it is concerned with two things, under which objective reality can be divided, and they are *wujud* and *mahiya*. They result from two questions that can be asked of any object: 'Is it?', *hiya*, and 'what is it?', *ma'hiya*. Every single question which reason deals with is a variation of one of these two. The first question deals with the existence or non-existence of a thing. The second deals with the thing's properties, qualities, and relations.

In the cosmic picture that we painted a few lines ago, we see how God is both the repository of *wujud*, being the only existent Real, and of *mahiya*, being the locus of every manifested quality or attribute. Let us track back for a moment to our pot. Are we saying that the substance that coagulates into a usable and tangible pot is Existence itself? How do we come to terms with that? Here Advaita Vedanta can, if not learn from or situate itself within, at least take a look at Sadr ad-Din Shirazi's transcendent theosophy, as Nasr calls it.

Schools of Islamic philosophy diverged on one fundamental issue: whether to regard existence, *asl al-wujud*, or essence, *asl al-mahiya*, as principal and foundational. The Ishraqi school of Shihab ud-Din Suhrawardi considered essences involving properties, attributes, qualities, and so on to be the truly, foundationally, real. The Iranian philosophical tradition continued in this till Mulla Sadra's own teacher Mir Damad, who denied the reality of existence as a substantial category in favour of essence. This matter is wholly unique to Islamic philosophy, so it would help if we translate this and situate it in the Vedantic paradigm.

In our pot example, the ultimate substance we arrived at was the formless *sat* or Existence. The trouble an Advaitic analysis must always face is to explain how this pure Existence could congeal and coagulate into something so tangible and finite as a pot. The concept of *maya* has been useful in explaining this, but the very physics and mechanics, as it were, of the process needs explanation if the theory of *maya* is not to become a *deus ex machina*. What exactly is the difficulty in *sat* becoming a pot? The problem is that of something formless becoming endued with properties and attributes.

Mulla Sadra's ontology helps to rescue us from this problem. To him it is no longer Essence that is primordial but Existence. Pure *Wujud* can become a pot composed of different attributes because attributes don't exist in any real sense at all. They are nothing more than the modulations of Being, just like light, a single unified substance, can vary in its frequency and intensity, assuming various forms and properties while being always the same substance. This variability in Being is called *tashkik al-Wujud*.

Are the waves different from the sea? They are apparently! But they aren't because waves are mere modulations of the sea. About the sea it is

understandable, one could say, but what about something formless and intangible becoming a thing with attributes. There are, at least at the level of *paramartha satya*, no attributes in any real sense. This is exactly what Advaita Vedanta maintains as well. For if you tried to grasp the attributes of the pot, you will fall into an infinite vortex, as we saw. Muhammad Kamal gives us a succinct summary of Mulla Sadra's position in these words: 'The systematic ambiguity of Being [*tashkik al-Wujud*] is the particularization of Being in which Being becomes manifest in its own individual modalities.'<sup>35</sup>

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who follows directly in this line, lays special emphasis on the mode of knowing Being. Because it can't be objectified and grasped by the hand, Being must reveal itself to us. This revealment of Being is termed *hudhur*. This and the acceptance of *wahdat al-wujud* and *tashkik al-wujud* colours his reception and interpretation of Advaita beautifully, and in ways that are theistically tinged. He doesn't deviate from the traditional understanding of the concepts of *maya* and *Atman*, but his way of interpreting these becomes a welcome new approach to them.

We spoke about the gradations of Being in Mulla Sadra. In his *The Garden of Truth*, Nasr puts it in Sufistic terms like this: 'The Sufi doctrine of *hijab* or veil is very similar to that of *māyā*. In essence, there are levels of reality or being ordered in such a manner that the lower is less real than the higher, which is veiled from it. The higher contains all that is positively real in the lower, but the lower does not possess the same degree of being or the same level of reality and perfection as the higher.'<sup>36</sup> A few lines before this in the same paragraph, Nasr makes the comparison more explicit: 'The Advaita Vedanta states that only *Ātman*, or the Divine Self, the Divine Ipseity, is Real and everything else

is *māyā*, not ultimately real. But this does not mean that *māyā* is simple illusion. The relative is not as real as the Absolute, but the relative does possess relative reality on its own level. It is only from the point of view of *Ātman* that nothing else is real' (ibid.).

This theistic impulse to not regard *māyā* as illusion, for God's creation cannot be demeaned, helps his case a lot. In *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Nasr emphasises the notion of God's *lila*, to view manifestation as a play of the Divine. His concern for nature and the impending global environmental crisis in books like *Man and Nature* and *Religion and the Order of Nature* brings out his views on how Vedantic philosophy and cosmology relate to the natural and spiritual crisis of modern times.

### **In Conclusion: the Human Being, Nature, and the Future**

According to the Quran, the human being is a representative of God on earth. He is here both to protect God's creation and to learn from it and perfect his soul. The world is, in Swamiji's words, a gymnasium. In Sufism, this doctrine is carried further with the concept of the Universal Person or the *Insaan al-Kāmil*. He is like an isthmus between the material and the divine realm, a being with one hand clasping the earth and with the other hand clasping the hem of the divine cloak. This, however, is a subject that would require a separate treatment of its own. Within the limits of space, we can only taste a few more drops, before we conclude, of how Nasr sees the recovery of both the realised human being and his engagement with Nature in Vedānta as urgent needs in the current world crisis.

We will begin first with nature. Seyyed Hossein Nasr's understanding of *māyā* helps him create a distinct Vedantic ecological theory. Seeing *māyā* positively, and not just as illusion, means to

see it as divine, as *āyat* of God. In his book *Man and Nature*, Nasr asserts:

A simplistic interpretation ... especially as prevalent among modern pseudo-Vedantins, would conclude that the world being *māyā*, usually translated as illusion, it matters little whether one lives in virgin nature or the ugliest urban environment, whether one surrounds oneself with sacred art or the worst trash produced by the machine. But this view is itself the worst possible delusion. ... But *māyā* is not only illusion, which is its negative aspect, but also the divine play or art. It veils the Supreme Self, the Absolute Reality, but also reveals and displays it.<sup>37</sup>

He writes further, after considering aspects of Islamic and Christian spiritual conceptions of nature, that: 'Only the revival of a spiritual conception of nature that is based on intellectual and metaphysical doctrines can hope to neutralize the havoc brought about by the applications of modern science and integrate this science itself into a more universal perspective' (106).

Seyyed Hossein Nasr calls us, not just here but throughout his work, to construct a Vedantic ecological philosophy, something that has not been seriously tried so far. This ecological philosophy of his comes, to use Stephen Gregg's term, from a vision of the 'universal human condition' as one of God's vicegerency. And this human condition, in his mind, is not just the Muslim's but also the Vedantin's.

We began by asking if Seyyed Hossein Nasr could be accepted as a teacher of the Advaitic tradition, and how far the definition of the 'Advaita tradition' can be stretched. Our lengthy analysis of that question seems to suggest not only that Seyyed Hossein Nasr is indeed a teacher of Advaita Vedānta but also that in his own way he enriches the tradition, coming as he does from an Islamic metaphysical perspective, and thus becomes himself an isthmus between the Islamic and Vedantic philosophies. ☪



## Notes and References

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3. See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E F J Payne, 2 vols (New York: Dover, 1958).
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13. See René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2001).
14. See Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993).
15. Acharya Shankara, *Atmabodha*, 2.
16. *Living Sufism*, 59.
17. *The Complete Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. Maurice O'C Walshe (New York: Crossroad, 2009), 51.
18. Naz Khilavi put this succinctly in his qawwali 'Tum Ek Gorakh Dhandha Ho', in the words 'Aap hi apna purdah ho; you are indeed your own veil'.
19. *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 130–1.
20. The rope is known as a rope and not as a snake. In the twelfth verse of the *Vivekachudamani*, Acharya Shankara says: 'By adequate reasoning, the conviction of the reality about the rope is gained, which puts an end to the great fear and misery caused by the snake worked up in the deluded mind.'
21. *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 122.
22. *Bhagavad Gītā with the Commentary of Śāṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2018), 13.2; 395–6.
23. *Khyativada* is a technical study of wrong or false cognition in the Indian philosophical traditions.
24. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2005), 20.
25. See Acharya Shankara, *Vivekachudamani*, 47.
26. *The Need for a Sacred Science*, 29. Emphasis added.
27. *Living Sufism*, 75.
28. Patrick Laude, *Divine Play, Sacred Laughter, and Spiritual Understanding* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 9. The first and second chapters of this book offer very interesting accounts on the concept of maya, from which the present study has greatly benefited.
29. Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Common Ground between Islam and Buddhism* (Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 2010), 52.
30. *Divine Play, Sacred Laughter*, 12.
31. A purely metaphysical analysis might run the risk of ignoring ananda altogether, being wholly focused on *sat* or *chit*. One must not forget that Advaita is ultimately a system aimed at moksha and the end of suffering.
32. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (New York: Caravan Books, 1997); and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ṣadr ad-Dīn Shīrāzī and his Transcendent Theosophy: Background, Life, and Works* (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy for Philosophy, 1978).
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# Acharya Shankara's Commentaries on the Prayer at the Hour of Death in the *Isha* and *Brihadaranyaka Upanishads*

Ivan Andrijić

THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES commentaries on the 'Prayer at the Hour of Death' traditionally attributed to Acharya Shankara, which appear in the same form in the *Isha Upanishad* and the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* in the *Kanva* recension.<sup>1</sup> A comparison of these two commentaries reveals their striking resemblance on (a) the broader level of the interpretation of the meaning of the Upanishadic passage in question, and (b) on the more specific level, where remarkably similar expressions and wording appear. These commentaries show no real differences, except that the commentary on the *Isha Upanishad*'s version of the prayer is more extensive than the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* version and thus contains some additional information. Although the similarities cannot be used as a valid means to prove they were written by the same author, they still may support this thesis.

## Introduction

In the *Isha Upanishad* and the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* we find the 'Prayer at the Hour of Death' that is uttered by a dying person to obtain a safe passage after death. The prayer appears

in the same form in both texts of the *Kanva* recension. The commentary on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, which is traditionally ascribed to Acharya Shankara, must be his genuine work as ascertained by both tradition and Acharya Sureshvara, traditionally held to be Acharya Shankara's direct disciple, who explicitly claims in his *varttika*, sub-commentary on Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* that Acharya Shankara, his teacher, is the author of the relevant commentary on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*.

For the commentary on *Isha Upanishad*, which is also traditionally attributed to Acharya Shankara, there is no such direct evidence for Acharya Shankara's authorship. However, in a recent article, I argued that this commentary is a genuine work of Acharya Shankara on the ground of Hacker's (1950) terminological criteria for determining Acharya Shankara's authorship and a stylometric statistical approach according to the General Imposters framework.<sup>2</sup> In this article, the commentaries, which I believe to be Acharya Shankara's, on this same passage that appears in both *Isha Upanishad* and *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* will be examined closely to demonstrate how much they have in common.

This article presents the Upanishadic text of the 'Prayer at the Hour of Death' according to Patrick Olivelle's translation, followed by my

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translation of the commentaries on the relevant passages from the *Isha Upanishad* and the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, which are attributed, justly in my opinion to Acharya Shankara. Later on, similarities between the commentaries will be highlighted alongside a brief analysis of the text.

### **Translation of the Prayer from the Isha and Brihararanyaka Upanishads**

This is the prayer from the *Isha Upanishad*:

The face of truth is covered with a golden dish.

Open it, O Pushan, for me, a person faithful to the truth. Open it, O Pushan, for me to see.<sup>3</sup>

O Pushan, sole seer! Yama! Sun! Son of Prajapati! Spread out your rays! Draw in your light!

I see your fairest form. That person up there, I am he! (16).

The never-resting is the wind, the immortal! Ashes are this body's lot. Om! Mind, remember the deed! Remember! Mind, remember (17).

O Fire, you know all coverings; O god, lead us to riches, along an easy path.

Keep the sin that angers far away from us; And the highest song of praise we shall offer to you! (18).<sup>4</sup>

Now we will see Acharya Shankara's commentary on these passages.<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Acharya Shankara's commentary mostly consists of glosses, that is, Acharya Shankara first quotes a word from the Upanishad and then explains the word with a synonymous word or expression, which is a gloss, in order to explain the meaning of the commented word. The word or expression that is quoted serves as a part of the sentence structure, together with its gloss. Therefore, the commentary represents an extension of the commentated text. This technique is typical for the functional style of scholastic Sanskrit and is often employed in commentaries with a certain degree of variety.<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes Acharya Shankara's commentaries feature a dialectically structured discussion following glosses. Such passages usually contain philosophical discussions, in which objections, *purvapaksha*, are raised in order to be immediately exposed to criticism, *uttarapaksha*. This pseudo-dialogue form appears after glosses in the commentary on the eighteenth verse of the *Isha Upanishad*, where the commentator Acharya Shankara criticises objections raised by the proponent of the teaching that the combination of ritual and knowledge leads to moksha.

In the translation, words from the Upanishad text are emphasised with single quotation marks to distinguish them from Acharya Shankara's explanations, which follow immediately thereafter. Upanishadic quotations used for the purposes of argumentation are marked with double quotation marks together with the reference to the Upanishadic passage in the endnotes. This is Acharya Shankara's commentary on the relevant passages from the *Isha Upanishad*:

Like 'golden', this one here is golden, that is, it consists of light. With that 'dish', which appears as a cover, 'the face', or door 'of the truth', that is, of Brahman, which stands in the solar orb ['the face'] 'is covered'. 'Open it, O Pushan', remove it; 'for me, a man faithful to the truth', for me whose duty is truth, because I devoutly meditate on you as the truth. I am he whose duty is truth; 'for him' means 'for me'; or it means to one [me] who performs one's duties according to the truth;<sup>7</sup> 'for me to see', to perceive you, whose Self is truth.<sup>8</sup>

'O Pushan': Pushan is the Sun because he nourishes [*poshana*] the world; the 'sole seer' [*rishi*] flows [*rishati*] or goes alone, that is why he is a 'sole seer'; Yama, because he binds [*samyamana*] everything together; that is why he is 'Yama'; 'Surya', because he appropriates [*svikarana*] rays, that is, breaths and essences; that is why he is 'Surya'. 'Prajaparya' is a descendant

of the Lord Prajapati, that is why he is 'Prajapatyā'. 'Spread out', separate 'your rays'. 'Draw in', unite; it brings together 'rays', heat or light. 'Through thy grace, I see 'your fairest', endlessly magnificent 'form'. However, I do not pray to you like a servant; I am the person, the one situated in the orb of the Sun whose limbs are utterances [*vyāhritis*];<sup>9</sup> a 'person', because such a person has the appearance of a human being; the whole world is filled [*pūrṇa*] with gusts that consist of breaths and intellect, that is why 'person'; or 'person' [*puruṣa*], because he resides in the city [*puri*].<sup>10</sup>

At this moment let the 'wind', the breath of me who is going to die, give up the limitations of individual personality, and attain its divine nature, which is a 'never-resting, immortal' thread-soul [*sūtratman*]<sup>11</sup> contained in everything; the word 'attain' is a *vakyashesha* [a part of a sentence that must be supplied in elliptic expressions]. Let the subtle body that is purified by knowledge and rites ascend; this is how it must be considered, through the strength of prayer for the path [by which the subtle body will ascend]. Thereupon, let this body that is sacrificed to the fire be turned into ashes. 'Om', according to the devout meditation [performed by the dying person], it is said that Brahman, whose name is sacrificial fire [Agni], whose Self is truth, is no different from Om since Om is its symbol. 'Mind', whose Self is determination, 'remember', the time has come to remember what I have remembered; therefore 'remember' everything that has appeared through all this time; O Fire, remember 'the deed', the deed I have performed since childhood, this is what you must remember. 'Mind, remember the deed! Remember!'—repetition implies zealotry.<sup>12</sup>

The person prays one more time for the path with another sacrificial formula, 'O Fire, lead us', conduct us towards 'an easy path', along the magnificent road. The distinction 'along an easy path' means avoiding the southern path.<sup>13</sup> I am disgusted with the southern path characterised by departing and returning [constant rebirth]; hence I pray to you to lead me along



Death of the Buddha (Gouache painting)

the magnificent road where there is no repeated departing and returning. 'To riches', to the fortune, to the enjoyment of the fruits of action; [lead] 'us', who are distinguished by the fruits of religious merit as indicated before;<sup>14</sup> 'all', every 'covering', act or cognition, 'O god, you know', you recognise as such. Moreover, 'keep us away from', deliver us from, destroy 'the sin that angers', a sin that is crooked, and has the nature of deception. Thereupon, when we shall be purified, we shall obtain what we desire, such is the meaning. However, we are now not able to attend 'you'. 'We shall offer you', we shall honour you with 'the highest', the most abundant 'song of praise', statement of homage; such is the meaning. "Knowledge and ignorance, a person who knows them both together, passes beyond death by ignorance."<sup>15</sup> "Passes beyond death by the destruction and by the becoming attains immortality" (14). Upon hearing so,

some [people] are in doubt. Therefore, we shall shortly consider [this topic] in order to remove it [the doubt]. In this manner, it is stated what the reason for the doubt is:

[*Purvapaksha*] Why is the knowledge of the highest Self in its principal meaning not conveyed by the words ‘knowledge’ and ‘immortality’?

[*Uttarapaksha*] Has it not been determined that the combination of knowledge and the act is unreasonable, because the knowledge of the highest Self is in contradiction to the act?

[*Purvapaksha*] This is true. But the contradiction is not recognised here, because contradiction and non-contradiction are proved valid by the scripture. Just as performance out of ignorance [rituals] and devout meditation on knowledge are proved valid by the scripture, the case is the same with their contradiction and non-contradiction. Just as we learn from the scripture that no living being should be killed, while on the other hand the scripture contradicts it with [the claim] that an animal should be killed in a sacrificial ceremony. The same is possible with knowledge and ignorance, and knowledge and [ritual] action can be combined.<sup>16</sup>

[*Uttarapaksha*] No; because the scripture claims that “Far apart and widely different are these two: ignorance and what is known as knowledge.”<sup>17</sup>

[*Purvapaksha*] What if there is no contradiction on account of the words [of scripture] where it is said that “knowledge and ignorance, a person who knows them both together”<sup>18</sup>? (*Isha Upanishad* 11)?

[*Uttarapaksha*] No, because there is a contradiction in cause, one’s own form and the fruit.

[*Purvapaksha*] And if there is no contradiction because there is an injunction to combine them, and because it is impossible to accept either contradiction or non-contradiction between knowledge and ignorance?

[*Uttarapaksha*] No, because it is unreasonable for them to co-exist.

[*Purvapaksha*] And if knowledge and ignorance take place in one recipient gradually?

[*Uttarapaksha*] No, because it is unreasonable to suppose that ignorance exists in the recipient of that [knowledge], because ignorance vanishes with the occurrence of knowledge. It is reasonable to suppose that, in the same recipient in whom the cognition ‘fire is bright and hot’ arose, an ignorant [cognition], doubt, or non-cognizance ‘fire is cold and dark’ cannot arise; and from the scripture [it is seen that] there is no possibility of sorrow, bewilderment, and the like: “When in the self of a discerning person, one’s very self has become all beings, what bewilderment, what sorrow can there be, regarding that self of the person who sees this oneness” (7). We said this because ignorance cannot arise [in a recipient of knowledge], an act that has arisen out of that [ignorance] is also unreasonable. “Attains immortality” (14), immortality is conditional here. If the word ‘knowledge’ presumes a knowledge of the highest Self, then the prayer for the path “with a golden” (16), and the like, is inapplicable. Therefore, devout meditation can be combined [with ritual], but not with the cognition of the highest Self; the sense of the mantras is exactly as we explained; in this way it is concluded.

Now, let us look at Acharya Shankara’s commentary on the relevant passage from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*:

The one who practised the combination of knowledge and action at the time of death prays to the sun. And this is contingent because it [the sun] is the fourth foot of the Gayatri meter. Worship of it [the sun] is under discussion, therefore it [the sun] is being prayed to. ‘With a golden’, ‘with a vessel’ consisting of light; like with some beloved thing concealed within a vessel, Brahman, known as the Truth, is concealed within the orb consisting of light because it is not fit to be seen by a mind that is not concentrated. ‘The face’, the principal in its own form, ‘[the face] of truth is concealed’; the ‘vessel’ is like a cover, which is the cause of the

hindrance to vision; 'O Pushan, O Savitri, the nourishing sun of the world, 'remove', make it open, remove the cause of the hindrance to vision; such is the meaning. 'To one faithful to the truth, such person's, that is, my duty is truth. I am that person, the one whose duty is truth; for one who had become your Self, such is the meaning, 'to see', in order to see. 'Sole seer', that person is the only seer; and that person is the 'sole seer' because of [one's] vision. That is the Self of the whole universe, the Eye that sees the truth of all; or the 'sole seer', goes alone because the mantras teach: "The sun roams alone."<sup>19</sup> O Yama, binding everything in the world is your deed. O Surya, fitly, who subdues the essences; or rays; or breaths; or thoughts of the world. 'Son of Prajapati', descendant of the Lord Prajapati or Hiranyagarbha; 'Son of Prajapati! Spread out, separate 'your rays!'. 'Draw in', contract 'light' so I can quickly see thy form. Just like lightning [hides] forms; therefore, bring together 'light'.

What is 'yours', thy 'form' among all that is eminently fair, fairest, this is what I see, with a change to 'we see'. That person, who has the utterance "*bhur* [earth], *bhuvah* [sky], *svah* [heaven]" as its limbs, and because that person has the shape of a human being, it is a person. 'I am he'. "Day and I"<sup>20</sup> because it is said in the Upanishad that they [*ahar*, 'day' and *aham*, 'I'] reside in the eye ['I'] and in the sun ['day']; here, it is said that I am that immortal, this is the relation. When this body of mine decays, although I am immortal in reality, the wind that is breath that resides in the body returns to the outer wind. In this manner, other divinities should go to their respective origins. Then this body that is reduced to ashes should go to the earth. At this moment, the person prays to the fire-god Agni, born from one's own volition, which is situated in the mind, 'Om Mind'. 'Om' and 'Mind' are both vocatives here. Or 'Om' because the syllable 'Om' is his [Agni's] symbol. And 'mind' because he is the one who consists of mentality. 'Om! O Mind!' 'remember the deed!' at the end of times one must remember,



'The Death of Casagemas', Picasso, 1901

because a desirable goal is attained through thy recollection at the time of death; hence I pray to thee: Recollect all that I have done. The repetition implies earnestness. Also, 'O Fire, lead us, make us reach 'an easy path' along the magnificent road 'to riches, to wealth, that is, to the attainment of the fruits of action. Not along the southern dark [path] that leads back to worldly existence, but along the bright 'easy path'; 'O God, the knower of everyone's 'covering', knowledge of every living being. Also, 'keep', that is, remove or detach from us the 'sin', crooked evil, everything born from evil. Freed us from this sin, we shall go along the highest path through thy grace. However, we cannot worship you; we only utter repeated salutations to thee; 'the highest', to thee 'to you' 'song of praise', utterance of salutations 'we shall offer'; let us serve you with an utterance of salutations, such is the meaning; we are unable to do anything else."<sup>21</sup>

### Similarities Between the Commentaries

It is possible to distinguish similarities between these two commentaries on different levels. On the first level, we can recognise a general agreement as to the main idea underlying both commentaries. The main idea of both commentaries is that the Upanishadic passage in question is a prayer in which a dying person prays to the sun in order to avoid the 'southern path' that leads back to the world of transmigration. In

the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* and the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, the southern path is described as a lower path that leads the deceased back to earthly existence when the beneficial fruits of ritual action are exhausted.<sup>22</sup>

The other path is the northern path of gods that leads to the world of lower Brahman or Hiranyagarbha. In his commentaries on both these passages, Acharya Shankara claims that the world of lower Brahman or Hiranyagarbha, *brahmaloka*, to which the northern path leads, is not a final liberation; that is, the world of lower Brahman is a result of the combination of ritual action, karma, and devout meditation, *upasana*. In Acharya Shankara's interpretation, (1) the southern path of the fathers is followed by those who practise Vedic rituals and it leads to the world of fathers; after the results of ritual actions are extinguished, they return to the world of transmigration. (2) The northern path is followed by those who combine Vedic ritual, karma, with devout meditation *upasana*, and it leads to the world of lower Brahman or Hiranyagarbha. (3) The final release is, however, completely different from both these paths, because liberation is knowledge of the highest Self.

Now, the question is, if liberation is only knowledge of the highest Self, what is the case with the northern path of the gods that leads to the world of Hiranyagarbha? This answer can be found in Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, where he explicitly claims that, in the world of Hiranyagarbha, a person lives for as many *kalpas* as a lifespan of Hiranyagarbha. When a life-span of the lower Brahman or Hiranyagarbha is finished, they do not return to the world.<sup>23</sup>

At the beginning of his commentary on the 'Prayer at the Hour of Death' in *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, Acharya Shankara explicitly claims that the prayer is uttered by one who

has practised the combination of knowledge and action, *jnana-karma-samucchayakarina*. The same is stated in the commentary on the prayer in *Isha Upanishad*, where Acharya Shankara claims in the seventeenth verse, that the subtle body purified by the combination of rites and knowledge ascends to the [northern] path. In the eighteenth verse, Acharya Shankara makes a detailed distinction between the combination [of knowledge and rites] and the knowledge of the highest Self.

In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, we find Acharya Shankara's critique of the *jnana-karma-samucchaya* view, which is attributed by Anandagiri to the ancient Advaitin Bhartṛiprapancha.<sup>24</sup> He was an adherent of an ancient Vedantic teaching called *bhedabhedavada*, the view that the world is not an illusion and that the world is simultaneously different and non-different from Brahman, just like the sea, highest Brahman, and the waves, multiplicity of the world. In this respect, the ritual portions of the Vedas, corresponding to the manifested world and Upanishads, corresponding to the highest Brahman, do carry the same importance, and should be combined in order to achieve liberation. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the eighteenth verse of the *Isha Upanishad* is similar to his commentary on *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 5.5.1, where Bhartṛiprapancha's idea of *bhedabhedavada* and the combination of ritual and knowledge is criticised by Acharya Shankara.

For Acharya Shankara, ritual action belongs to the sphere of ignorance, because it is driven by desire, and cannot remove ignorance; ignorance can be removed only by its opposite, knowledge, and not by action.<sup>25</sup> Acharya Shankara also removes the doubt raised in the eighteenth verse of the *Isha Upanishad* that the process of knowing arises gradually and that rites deal with the first stages of the rise of knowledge leading to



liberation. Acharya Shankara asserts that, when knowledge arises, fire is hot, no ignorance remains, fire is cold.

In his commentary on the *Isha Upanishad*, Acharya Shankara criticises the view that knowledge can appear gradually and his reasoning is found in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*.<sup>26</sup> Here, Acharya Shankara criticises the teaching of the gradual appearance of knowledge of the Self, which is again attributed by Anandagiri to Bhartriprapancha, who taught that the combined path of ritual and knowledge leads to the gradual process of liberation. According to Acharya Shankara, the combined path of ritual and knowledge can lead only to the world of lower Brahman, Hiranyagarbha. In his commentary on the eighteenth verse of *Isha Upanishad*, he even specifies that 'knowledge', in the combination of ritual and knowledge, means devout meditation, *upasana*, most probably a deliberation on a particular Upanishadic passage that deals with the lower Brahman.

On this general philosophical level, we thus see a significant agreement between the commentaries on the relevant portions of the *Isha Upanishad* and the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. On the other hand, the consistency of both of these commentaries with Acharya Shankara's commentaries on *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* and the *Chhandogya Upanishad* is also obvious.

The second level of agreement of both these commentaries exists on the level of glosses, the explanatory expressions used to interpret particular Upanishadic words and phrases. On this level of interpretation, both commentaries are in remarkable agreement, although the commentary on the *Isha Upanishad* is longer and contains more information.

At the beginning, for instance, the Upanishadic word *hiranmaya*, 'golden' is glossed in both the commentaries with the same expression



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*jjyotirmaya*, 'consisting of light'; the word *patra*, 'vessel' is glossed in both commentaries with the same word *apidhana*, 'cover'. Furthermore, both commentaries derive the name Yama, the god of death, from *samyamana*, 'binding together'. The word *rashmi*, 'ray' is glossed in both commentaries with the words *prana*, 'breath' and *rasa*, 'essence'.

Prajapatya is a descendant, *apatya*, of the lord Prajapati. The imperative *vyuha*, 'spread out' is interpreted in both texts with *vigamaya*, 'separate'. The case is the same with the imperative *samuha*, 'draw in', which is glossed with *upasamhara*, 'bring together'. In both commentaries, *purusha* from the prayer consists of limbs, *avayava*, that are seven utterances, *vyahriti*. In his commentary on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, Acharya Shankara elaborates somewhat further by first enumerating three great utterances, *vyahritis*; *bhur*, *bhuvah*, and *svar*. The Upanishadic *raye*, 'to riches', is glossed in both commentaries with the synonymous word *dhanaya*, 'to fortune'.

There are also similar expressions in both commentaries. For instance, when commenting on the repetition of the words, '*Krato smara kritam smara krato smara kritam smara*; mind, remember the deed! Remember! Mind, remember', Acharya Shankara says, '*punar uktir adarartha*'



in the commentary on the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad* and 'punar vachanam adarartham' in the commentary on the *Isha Upanishad*, both meaning, the 'repetition implies earnestness'.

Also in his commentary on the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad*, we find: 'He'gne naya prapaya supatha shobhanena margena; O Fire, lead us, make us reach an easy path, along the magnificent road.' And in the commentary on the *Isha Upanishad*, we find: 'He'gne! naya gamaya supatha shobhanena margena; O Fire, lead us, conduct us towards an easy path, along the magnificent road.' Also, there is a remarkable similarity in the interpretation of the Upanishadic passage that appears as the seventeenth verse in the *Isha Upanishad* and as 5.15.1 in the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad*, where it states 'Om krato', which is interpreted in both commentaries as a hail to Agni, whose symbol is Om.<sup>27</sup>

### Conclusion

Both commentaries on the 'Prayer at the Hour of Death' contain striking similarities (a) on the broader level of understanding the sense of the Upanishadic passage in question and (b) on the micro-level of glossing Upanishadic expressions, where the same or similar expressions appear and the Upanishadic words are glossed with the same synonyms. No remarkable differences appear in these commentaries, although the commentary on the *Isha Upanishad* version of the prayer is longer and it contains some additional information. It is quite understandable that, no matter how similar the passages are, the similarities cannot be direct proof that the same person composed both texts. Although I, in a forthcoming paper, have argued on different grounds that the commentaries on the *Isha Upanishad* and the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad* were indeed composed by Acharya Shankara, the similarities indicated here may support this thesis. ❧

### Notes and References

1. See *Isha Upanishad*, 15–8 and *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 5.15.1.
2. See Ivan Andrijačić, 'Acharya Shankara and the Authorship of the Īśā-Upaniṣad-Bhāṣya and Kāṭha-Upaniṣad-Bhāṣya', Forthcoming.
3. *Isha Upanishad*, 15.
4. Patrick Olivelle, *The Early Upanisads* (New York: Oxford University, 1998), 141–3, 409–11.
5. For convenience sake I offer here my translation. My translation does not bring anything new except that it highlights in the endnotes, the parallels with Acharya Shankara's commentary on the relevant passage from the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad*. Fine translations of the same commentary can be found in *Eight Upaniṣads, with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda, 2 vols (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2006), 1.26–32 and *Īśopaniṣad: The Secret Teaching on the Lord*, trans. Neal Delmonico and Lloyd W Pflueger (Kirkville: Blazing Sapphire, 2017), 99–118.
6. For an explanation of the glossing technique in scholastic Sanskrit, see Gary A Tubb and Emery R Boose, *Scholastic Sanskrit: A Manual for Students* (New York: The American Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2007), 19–31.
7. Two possible interpretations are presented here: according to the first one, a dying person prays to Pushan to remove the cover so that the face of Brahman residing in the solar orb can be removed. The dying person performs a devout meditation, *upasana*, on Brahman as truth. The second possibility is that the dying person is acting rightfully according to one's duty.
8. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Isha Upanishad*, 15.
9. The seven worlds are called *vyāhritis*. The large *vyāhritis* are *bhur*, earth; *bhuvar*, atmosphere; and *sva*, heaven; the others are *mahar*, *janar*, *tapar*, and *satya*.
10. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Isha Upanishad*, 16. Here, Acharya Shankara presents two interpretations of the word 'purusha' or 'person'. According to associative resemblance, the word 'purusha' is connected to (a) *purna*, full, or (b) *puri*, city.
11. We find the term 'sutra' or 'thread' in the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 3.7.1–2. This thread is

- designated as *vayu*, wind, by which this life, the next life, and all beings are held together. In his commentary on this passage, Acharya Shankara designates *sutra* as the innermost by which the earth, gods, and Vedas are held together. Also, in Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 5.5.1, the birth of Brahman as truth, *satya*-brahman is the birth of *sutratman*, who is the same as *hiranyagarbha* or the manifestation of *avyakrita*, the undifferentiated universe. In Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Aitareya Upanishad*, 3.3, *sutratman* is again the same as *hiranyagarbha*. This means that *sutratman* is a lower Brahman, an all-pervading entity closely connected to *vayu*, wind.
12. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Isha Upanishad*, 17. Also compare the statement in Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 5.15.1, '*punar-ukti adarartha*' with the statement in his commentary on the *Isha Upanishad*, 17, '*punar vachanam adarartham*'.
  13. The southern path in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 6.2, and the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 5.10.3, is a path of fathers.
  14. I have translated *dharma* here as 'religious merit', because Acharya Shankara is not referring only to the fruit of ritual action, but also to the fruit of devout meditation, *upasana*, which leads towards the path of gods.
  15. *Isha Upanishad*, 11.
  16. The same problem is discussed in Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 5.1.1. The opponent identified by Anandagiri as Bhartrihari Prapancha claims that Brahman is simultaneously different and non-different from the manifested world, like the ocean and the waves. The case is the same with ritual, analogous to the world, and the Upanishadic, analogous to Brahman, portions of the Vedas, which are equally important to *moksha*. The opponent in *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 5.1.1, presents the same example of hurting animals, enjoined in the ritual portions, and the example of not hurting animals, enjoined in the Upanishads, which co-exist. From the *bhedabhedavada* point of view, this is not a contradiction, that is, this apparent contradiction is analogous to the difference—or ritual portions enjoining the sacrifice of animals—and non-difference—the Upanishads prescribing the non-hurting of animals.
  17. *Katha Upanishad*, 1.2.4.
  18. *Isha Upanishad*, 11.
  19. *Taittiriya Sambhita*, 7.4.18.
  20. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 5.5.3.
  21. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 5.15.1.
  22. See *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 6. 2.16 and *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 5.10.10.
  23. See Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 6.2.15. It is interesting to note that Acharya Shankara finds a philological argument for this interpretation in the Madhyandina version of the text, where the particle *iba* 'here' appears. Acharya Shankara argues that the Madhyandina text '*tesham ibha na punar avrittir asti*'; they do not return here' with *iba*, which does not appear in *Kanva* text, indicates that they will not return; otherwise, the word *iba* would be meaningless.
  24. See Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 4.4.22. For more on Bhartrihari Prapancha's view on *jnana-karma-samucchaya* and further reading material on Bhartrihari Prapancha, see Hajime Nakamura, *A History of Early Vedanta Philosophy*, 2 vols (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004), 2.149–51; Ivan Andrijačić, 'Quotations and (Lost) Commentaries in Advaita Vedānta: Some Philological Notes on Bhartrihari Prapancha's "Fragments"', *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 43/2–3 (May 2015), 257–76; and Ivan Andrijačić, 'Bhartrihari Prapancha and the Eight States of Brahman', *Revista Científica Guillermo de Ockham*, 14/1 (April 2016), 57–67.
  25. See Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 3.2.13; his commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*, 1.1.4; and his introduction to his commentary on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 3.3.1.
  26. See Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 3.2.13. The view of the gradual attainment of liberation, *kramamukti*, is also criticised in Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*, 1.1.12. See also his commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*, 1.3.33 and 3.2.21, where *kramamukti* is not final liberation.
  27. The phrase is '*omkara-pratikatvad*' in the commentary on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* and '*om-pratikatmakatvat*' in the in the commentary on the *Isha Upanishad*.

# Advaita Vedanta and the Dadu Panth

Michael S Allen

TO WHAT EXTENT SHOULD the north Indian saints, *nirguna* bhakti poets such as Kabir, Ravidas, and Dadu be considered popularisers of Advaita Vedanta? This essay focuses on the place of Advaita Vedanta within the Dadu Panth, the community that traces its founding to Dadu Dayal in the sixteenth century. I argue that while Dadu's own views are open to interpretation, the Dadu Panth came to see his teachings as fully compatible with Acharya Shankara's metaphysics, and Advaita Vedanta became an important lens through which Dadu's works were read. Thus Dadu himself, if not the historical Dadu, then at least Dadu as interpreted by his followers, can indeed be considered a part of what I have elsewhere referred to as 'Greater Advaita Vedanta', or Advaita Vedanta as expressed outside the standard canon of Sanskrit philosophical works.

Advaita Vedanta is often thought of as a Sanskrit tradition, but there are also rich, centuries-old traditions of Vedanta in regional languages throughout India. These vernacular traditions played an important role in the spread of Vedantic teachings in late medieval and early modern India, yet they remain understudied when compared with Sanskrit traditions. The present essay focuses on Advaita Vedanta in Hindi, and more specifically on the place of Advaita Vedanta within the Dadu Panth, a community

that traces its founding to Dadu Dayal in the sixteenth century.

Dadu was one of the most influential *nirguna* bhakti poets in north India, alongside other saints such as Kabir, Ravidasa, and Guru Nanak. Any attempt to write the history of Advaita Vedanta in north India must take account of the traditions of these saints. But the relationship of the early saints to Advaita Vedanta is itself a matter of debate. They are sometimes viewed as having popularised Vedantic teachings in a language ordinary people could understand. This was the position of Swami Vivekananda, for example, who mentions Dadu and Kabir by name in his 'Reply to the Madras Address'.<sup>1</sup>

More recently, S K Shrivastava, in a chapter on 'Advaita in Hindi', has written: 'Through creative writings in Hindi also Advaita, especially in its practical aspect, reached the common folk. Kabir, Nanak, Ravidas, Dadu Dayal, Sundaradas ... imprinted true Advaita on the minds of the masses.'<sup>2</sup> Shrivastava goes on to note, however, that 'the saint-tradition of North India ... is in many ways different from the orthodox Indian philosophical tradition' (ibid.). The saints, he observes, downplayed the authority of the Vedas, they did not distinguish sharply between *nirguna* and *saguna* Brahman, and they emphasised bhakti rather than jnana. This raises the question: is it accurate to speak of the saints as having popularised Vedanta or would it be better to treat them as having their own distinctive philosophy? This in turn raises broader questions: what do we mean by Vedanta? Who counts as a Vedantin?

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Elsewhere I have argued that there is no reason to restrict the label to the well-known canon of classical Sanskrit writers—Acharya Shankara, Acharya Sureshvara, Acharya Padmapada, Vachaspati Mishra, Prakashatman, Vidyaranya, Madhusudana Sarasvati, and so on—nor is there any reason to insist on affiliation with a lineage tracing itself back to Acharya Shankara. In order to trace the popularisation of Advaita Vedanta, it is important to focus not only on the classical tradition, but also on what might be termed ‘Greater Advaita Vedanta’ or Advaita Vedanta as expressed in vernacular works, in non-scholastic works, and in works that mix Vedanta with other traditions.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, we must be cautious not to use the label too freely. Seeing non-duality everywhere might be a sagely virtue, but it is not necessarily a scholarly virtue.

In the case of the early sants, there is no doubt that many of their poems show the influence of Advaita Vedanta; but they also show the influence of Nath Yoga, Vaishnava bhakti, and Sufism. Moreover, the early sants were poets and mystics, not systematic thinkers, and as a result their works are often open to more than one interpretation. Although many of their verses express Advaita, others seem to favour some form of *bhedabheda*. Should the early sants be considered a part of Greater Advaita Vedanta or should we limit the category to thinkers whose works express Vedantic teachings unambiguously?

In this essay I will explore this question by focussing on the case of Dadu and his poems, which were compiled by his disciples in a work known as the *Dadu-vani*. As with other early sants, scholars have argued over the extent to which the Advaita taught by Dadu corresponds to the Advaita taught by Acharya Shankara. I do not intend to enter this debate here. What I wish to argue instead is that while Dadu’s

own views are open to interpretation, the Dadu Panth came to see his teachings as fully compatible with Advaita Vedanta and the conceptual framework of classical Advaita Vedanta became a lens through which the *Dadu-vani* was read.

Thus Dadu himself, if not the historical Dadu, then at least Dadu as interpreted by his followers, can indeed be considered a part of the history of Greater Advaita Vedanta. In what follows, I will attempt to trace the steps through which the ‘Vedanticisation’ of the Dadu Panth took place. After considering Dadu’s own poems, I will discuss the works of Sundaradasa, a direct disciple of Dadu, whom his biographer Raghavadasa referred to as ‘a second Shankaracharya.’<sup>4</sup> I will then draw attention to the *Vichara-sagar* of the Dadupanthi pandit Nishchaladasa, a work once referred to by Swamiji as having ‘more influence in India than any that has been written in any language within the last three centuries.’<sup>5</sup> Finally, I will consider modern editions of the *Dadu-vani* that interpret Dadu’s poems through the lens of Advaita Vedanta.

### **Dadu (c. 1544/5–1604)**

Dadu Dayal was born near Ahmedabad in the mid sixteenth-century, but he spent most of his life in Rajasthan, which remains the centre of the Dadu Panth to this day.<sup>6</sup> Like Ravidasa and Kabir, Dadu seems to have been of low caste; early sources identify him as a cotton-carder, *dhuniya*.<sup>7</sup> Dadu is said to have been initiated on the spiritual path by a mysterious old man he met when he was eleven years old. Seven years later he had a vision of God that left him completely disinterested in the things of this world. After a period of wandering, he eventually settled in Sambhar, where he is said to have had a vision of Kabir, who removed his remaining doubts.

Like Kabir, Dadu encountered resistance from local religious authorities, whose orthodoxy

was threatened by his rejection of outward rituals; but he is said to have overcome their opposition through his miracles and his evident sanctity. Though inwardly detached and devoted to meditation, Dadu kept up the appearances of worldly life; he continued to card cotton for some time, and he had a wife and children. He travelled and taught throughout Rajasthan until his death at Naraina in 1604. His eldest son, Garibdasa, became his first successor as head of the Dadu Panth or the Path of Dadu.

Over the course of his life, Dadu composed a great number of *sakhis* and *pads*, which were compiled by his disciples in the generation after his death. Today the *Dadu-vani* or 'speech of Dadu', as this compilation is known, is available in multiple printed editions in Hindi and selections from the *Vani* have been translated into English by W G Orr, K N Upadhyaya, and Monika Thiel-Horstmann.<sup>8</sup> The central themes of Dadu's spiritual vision emerge clearly in the *Vani*. The present life is infinitely precious, since it gives us a chance of uniting with God; nothing else truly matters. God, variously referred to by Dadu as Niranjana, 'the stainless', Ram, Parabrahm, the Creator, Hari, Keshava, Govinda, is the highest, ultimate reality, beyond all forms and yet present within the heart of the devotee. God can be reached through the grace of a guru and through reciting the divine Name. Dadu teaches a path of devotion and self-effacement, a path that embraces both the pangs of separation and the joy of union.

How exactly Dadu envisioned the state of union is not entirely clear, however. Many of his poems speak of a 'face to face', *sanmukh*, meeting between the soul and God, rather than an identification of jiva and Brahman: 'Merged in the word he remains face to face with the supreme Self / At the sight of him he, Dadu, becomes perfect, he embraces the imperishable One.'<sup>9</sup> And

again: 'Fearlessness is there and no dread, one sports there for ever ... grant your sight, face to face, O Creator!'<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere, Dadu describes the state of union in non-dualistic terms:

Where Rama is, there I am not; where I am,  
there Rama is not;

The mansion is delicate; it has no place for two.

Where I am not, there have I betaken myself,  
where is One alone, no second.

For that which 'is not', there is ample room in  
the true abode.<sup>11</sup>

For Dadu, this non-dualistic state is ultimately beyond expression:

There, is neither silence nor speech, no 'I' nor  
'thou';

No self or other, neither 'one' nor 'two'.

If I say 'one', there are two; if I say 'two', there  
is but one.

Thus is Dadu perplexed. As He is, so do thou  
behold Him.<sup>12</sup>

These verses could easily be interpreted as teaching the same non-dualism that Acharya Shankara teaches. As we shall see momentarily, this is exactly how the Dadu Panth itself came to interpret them. But even these verses, and there are many more like them, are not entirely unambiguous. Dadu has taught that the soul merges with God, but he has not necessarily affirmed the absolute identity, *atyantabheda*, of the jiva with Brahman. It might be possible, for example, to read these lines as expressing something like the Sufi doctrine of *fana*, or extinction of the ego within God, a doctrine which has not always been interpreted along the lines of absolute identity.<sup>13</sup> Consider, for example, the explanation of this state by Shaikh Sharaf ud-Din Maneri (fl. 14th century):

The fourth stage consists in the pouring forth of the Divine Light so profusely that it absorbs all individual existences in the eyes of the pilgrim. As in the case of the absorption of particles floating in the atmosphere in the light of the sun, the particles become invisible—they do not cease to exist, nor do they become the sun, but they are inevitably lost to sight in the overpowering glare of the sun—so, here, a creature does not become God, nor does it cease to exist. Ceasing to exist is one thing, invisibility is another.<sup>14</sup>

It might also be possible to read Dadu's verses through the lens of the other schools of Vedanta. Shantiswarup Tripathi, in a book-length study arguing for the influence of Acharya Shankara's Vedanta on the *nirguna* bhakti poets, cites several passages in which Dadu's views on the jiva and Brahman seem to be aligned with Acharya Shankara's.<sup>15</sup> But S K Mishra argues that such passages might instead be read along the lines of Vishishtadvaita.<sup>16</sup> He suggests that Dadu, like Ramanuja and other Vaishnava acharyas, maintained the non-duality of Brahman and the jiva, but did not believe that all differences between them were erased.

W G Orr, for his part, acknowledges that Dadu declares 'the essential oneness of the human soul and the supreme Brahma' in numerous passages in his *Vani*.<sup>17</sup> He quotes, for example, the lines: 'Thus speaks the Self, Niranjana, the Source of every excellency: / I and my worshipper are not two: We are wholly one' (157).<sup>18</sup> But almost immediately he goes on to argue: 'It is equally clear, however, that a real distinction is implied, not only in isolated expressions which might be freely cited from the *Bani*, but in Dadu's whole conception of the relation of the human soul to God. Obviously there can be no union in the



Shree Dadu Dayal Dham, Kankariya, Ahmedabad

sphere of absolute identity. Moral and spiritual oneness involves some kind of distinction, relative or absolute, between the two made one'.<sup>19</sup>

### **Sundaradasa (1596–1689)**

While Dadu's views are open to interpretation, later thinkers within the Dadu Panth not only embraced Advaita Vedanta unambiguously, they used it as a lens through which to interpret Dadu's thought. The process of Vedantisation began in the generation immediately after Dadu, when Sundaradasa, who had been initiated by the elderly Dadu while still a boy, was sent to Benares to study Sanskrit. He spent nearly twenty years there studying Puranas and Vedanta, and when he returned to Rajasthan, he wrote works which synthesised Dadu's teachings with Sanskrit traditions. In Sundaradasa's view, Dadu and other saints were spiritual heirs to the pan-Indian traditions of bhakti yoga, hatha yoga, and, most importantly for our purposes here, Advaita Vedanta, which Sundaradasa saw as the highest of these teachings.<sup>20</sup>

Sundaradasa was the most influential systematic thinker within the early Dadu Panth. In his

major doctrinal work, *Jnana-samudra*, 'Sea of Knowledge', Sundaradasa expresses the central teachings of Acharya Shankara's Vedanta leaving no room for interpretation:

You are that very Brahman who is pure consciousness and bliss;

*Jiva*-hood, or union with the body, is an error.

Know this entire world to be non-existent.

Regard birth and death as a dream.<sup>21</sup>

The *Jnana-samudra* includes chapters on bhakti yoga, hatha yoga, and Sankhya yoga, but the culminating chapter is devoted to Advaita, which Sundaradasa sees as the ultimate goal of the spiritual path. Sundaradasa describes the non-dual state in unmistakably Vedantic terms, referring to it as *turiyatita* or 'beyond the Fourth', and speaking of its realisation, *sakshatkara*, as resulting from the practice of *shravana*, *manana*, and *nididhyasana*.<sup>22</sup>

For Sundaradasa, there was no conflict between Dadu's teaching and the metaphysics of Advaita Vedanta; indeed, he identifies the two. Consider the following verse from Sundaradasa's *Guru Upadesh-jnana-ashtaka*, 'Eight Verses on the Knowledge from the Guru's Teaching', which purports to describe the teachings of Dadu, but which could just as easily be describing the teachings of Acharya Shankara:

Just as a snake appears in a rope, or silver in mother-of-pearl,

Just as the mind perceives water in a mirage, so the world is false (*mithya*).

To him who reached the state of the undivided (*akhanda*) Brahman, [perceiving] non-duality everywhere,

To the famed *sadguru* Dadudayal I bow.<sup>23</sup>

The Dadu Panth itself seems to have recognised Sundaradasa's affinity with the school of

Acharya Shankara; his earliest biographer, Raghavadasa, writes:

Sundar[dasa], [the disciple] of Dadu, was a second Shankaracarya,

Removing the sense of duality, he sang of non-duality alone.<sup>24</sup>

### **Nishchaladasa (c. 1791–1863)**

Sundaradasa's elevation of Advaita Vedanta in turn laid the groundwork for the most famous representative of Advaita Vedanta in the Dadu Panth: Nishchaladasa, about whom T R V Murti once wrote: 'The great popularity that the Advaita Vedanta enjoys in the non-scholarly world of sadhus, house-holders and other informed laymen is, in great measure, due to the two Hindi works of Santa Nishchaladasa's [*sic*] *Vicara Sagara* and *Vrtti Prabhakara*.'<sup>25</sup> Nishchaladasa's biography parallels that of Sundaradasa in many ways. Both were initiated as Dadupanthi renunciates as children; both were sent to Benares, where they studied for many years with Sanskrit pandits; and both went on to write vernacular works that were widely read in their day.<sup>26</sup> Here I will focus on Nishchaladasa's *Vichara-sagara*, 'Ocean of Inquiry', which offers a comprehensive introduction to Advaita Vedanta. His other major work, the *Vrtti-prabhakara*, 'Light on Cognition', is a more advanced work on Vedantic epistemology.

Whereas Sundaradasa's works present a synthesis of many different teachings, Nishchaladasa's *Vichara-sagara* is strictly a work of Advaita Vedanta. Indeed, were it not composed in Hindi, and were it not for verses in praise of Dadu at the end of each chapter, it would read much like any shastric-style work of classical Advaita Vedanta. In the course of establishing the identity of the jiva and Brahman, the unreality of the world, and the path to liberation through knowledge, Nishchaladasa touches on virtually every

major topic in the classical tradition: theories of error; the differences between *abhasa-vada*, *pratibimba-vada*, *avachcheda-vada*, and *drishiti-srishiti-vada*; the interpretation of *mahavakyas*; the nature of *jivan-mukti*; and so on. Nishchaladasa's work is steeped in the technical vocabulary of the Sanskrit scholastic tradition. Consider, for example, his definition of the jiva: 'The (illusory) reflection of consciousness (*chidabhasa*) in the intellect (*buddhi*) together with the consciousness [that serves as] the substratum (*adhishtan-chetan*) for the intellect.'<sup>27</sup>

In style and content, Nishchaladasa's works are far removed from Dadu's poetry. Yet Nishchaladasa, like Sundaradasa before him, sees no contradiction between Acharya Shankara's teachings and Dadu's teachings. Indeed, in his verses to Dadu at the end of each chapter, he even invokes Dadu as a form of Brahman. The final chapter of the *Vichara-sagara* concludes with these two verses:

The one with whom the sage, in liberation at death, is non-different

Is Dadu, whose original form is spoken of in the Vedas.

Name and form are inconstant, the incomparable One is pervasive.

The implied referent of the word Dadu is being, consciousness, bliss.<sup>28</sup>

Both Sundaradasa and Nishchaladasa engaged with Advaita Vedanta explicitly, in a way that Dadu himself never did. Sundaradasa began the process of Vedanticisation, building on hints and openings already present in the works of Dadu himself, which allowed him to present Dadu's teachings as fully compatible with those of Advaita Vedanta. With Nishchaladasa, the process reached a culminating point, and Nishchaladasa's works came to be accepted as authoritative expositions of Advaita Vedanta even

outside the Dadu Panth. The *Vichara-sagara* was translated into many languages. Ramana Maharshi made his own abridged version of the Tamil translation, which has been published in English as the *Jewel Garland of Enquiry*.<sup>29</sup> Nishchaladasa's work was even translated into Sanskrit and eventually published with the blessing of the Shankaracharya of Kanchi, Chandrashekharendra Sarasvati.<sup>30</sup>

### Modern Editions of the Dadu-vani

Through Nishchaladasa's influence, as well as through the synthesising work of earlier Dadupanthi authors such as Sundaradasa, the conceptual framework and technical vocabulary of Advaita Vedanta came to be used as a means of interpreting Dadu's original works. The first scholarly edition of the *Dadu-vani* was prepared by C P Tripathi and published in 1907. In his introduction Tripathi writes: 'A knowledge of Vedanta is extremely important if one is to understand Dadu's *Vani*. The Dadupanthi sadhu and pandit Nishchaladasa has set forth the system of Vedanta in a most excellent way in his works *Vicar-sagar* and *Vritti-prabhakar*. ... He who understands the system of Vedanta will have no difficulty understanding the import (*tatparya*) of Dayal-ji's *Vani*.'<sup>31</sup>

To aid the reader in drawing out this *tatparya*, Tripathi sometimes includes glosses explaining Dadu's ideas using Vedantic vocabulary. Consider one of Dadu's well-known opening *mangala* verses, in which the supreme Brahman is referred to as *paraparam*. Tripathi glosses the term as *parat param*, 'higher than the highest', which is straightforward enough, but he then goes on to explain: '*Karan-rup maya vishisht chetan (ishvar) se pare shuddh chetan so parabrahm hai*; the supreme Brahman is pure consciousness, which is higher than consciousness-qualified-by-maya-in-its-causal-form (*ishvara*) (1).



The 1951 edition of the *Dadu-vani* prepared by Swami Mangaldas similarly interprets Dadu's works with terms and concepts from scholastic Advaita Vedanta. Consider, for example, the line, 'The self, *atama*, is Ram's throne, there the Lord, *bhagavan*, dwells', in which Dadu describes the intimate connection between God and the soul.<sup>32</sup> This verse does not seem to speak of identity, but that is nonetheless how Swami Mangaldas interprets it, using the vocabulary of Advaita Vedanta. He glosses 'the self' as 'the inner faculty once purified', *antahkaran vishuddh kar*, and he glosses Ram as 'one's own nature', *svavarup*, leaving us with the arguably quite different reading, 'The purified inner faculty is the throne of one's own nature.'<sup>33</sup> Examples such as this can be found throughout Swami Mangaldas's glosses.

Let me cite just one more twentieth-century edition of the *Dadu-vani*, this time by Swami Narayandas, a prolific and highly respected Dadupanthi scholar. Swami Narayandas's edition of the *Dadu-vani* includes not just glosses but a full explanatory commentary. Now it is important to remember that Dadu's songs were composed in an early form of Hindi and they are not always accessible to modern Hindi speakers. A work like Swami Narayandas's, which includes an interlinear commentary that doubles as a modern Hindi translation explaining the meaning of each verse, is therefore bound to influence readers of the text. And Swami Narayandas regularly interprets Dadu's verses through the lens of Advaita Vedanta.

Examples could easily be multiplied, but for the sake of space I will give just one. Recall the verse quoted above, in which Dadu concludes: 'Thus is Dadu perplexed. As he is, so do thou behold him.' Dadu himself is content to leave his readers with the rasa of astonishment. He clearly teaches non-dualism, but he does not spell out

his metaphysics. By Swami Narayandas's day, however, Dadupanthi felt no hesitation in interpreting Dadu's thought with the help of Advaita Vedanta. In explaining the verse, Swami Narayandas writes: 'Brahman and the jiva are one, since they both are consciousness, *chetan*, and the world, *samsar*, which is non-conscious, *jad*, and something seen, *drishya*, is [merely] an illusory transformation, *vivart*, of consciousness, so duality cannot be established.'<sup>34</sup>

Certainly this is a possible reading of Dadu; but it is equally undeniable that ideas have been introduced here, which are nowhere explicitly set forth in Dadu's works.

Again, it is not my intention here to argue either for or against these Vedantic interpretations of Dadu's works. Still less do I wish to enter into a debate about the appropriateness of authorial intent as a criterion for literary interpretation. I hope instead to have shown that a gradual process of Vedanticisation took place within the Dadu Panth. Dadu's works themselves can be read in different ways, and although they certainly teach a form of non-dualism, it is not clear to what extent this non-dualism should be identified with the non-dualism of Advaita Vedanta. After all, there have been many different forms of Advaita in the history of Indian thought: for example, Yogachara Buddhism, Madhyamaka Buddhism, and Trika Shaivism all teach different versions of non-dualism; and even within the Vedantic fold, the schools of Ramanuja and Vallabha lay claim to the label of Advaita, though their views are at odds with Acharya Shankara.

But when Dadu's disciple Sundaradasa set out to formulate a systematic metaphysics for the Dadu Panth, it was to Advaita Vedanta that he looked. In this sense he may be said to have Vedanticised the Dadu Panth. As I have argued elsewhere, however, the process was not

one-sided. Sundaradasa not only Vedanticised the Dadu Panth, he also 'Daduised' Vedanta, effectively creating a new form of Advaita Vedanta by synthesising it with the path of the saints.

With Nishchaladasa the process of Vedanticisation was taken even further; we see a Dadupanthi renunciate writing a work of 'pure' Advaita Vedanta, without any attempt to synthesise it with *nirguna* bhakti teachings. In the final stage of Vedanticisation, Nishchaladasa's works, or at least the scholastic traditions of Advaita Vedanta represented in them, become an interpretive framework through which Dadu's original works are read. Effectively, then, Dadu himself, if not the historical Dadu, then at least Dadu as experienced by modern readers within the Dadu Panth, becomes an Advaita Vedantin.

Any account of vernacular Vedanta in north India must take account of the saints. In this essay, I have shown how at least one historically influential lineage of saints came to interpret its own metaphysics through the framework of Advaita Vedanta. The extent to which a similar process of Vedanticisation might have unfolded in other *nirguna sampradayas* remains a topic for further research.<sup>35</sup> The example of the Dadu Panth suggests that rather than generalising about the saints, we should be attentive to individual differences, since Dadu, Sundaradasa, and Nishchaladasa did not all engage with Advaita Vedanta in the same way. Then again, perhaps Dadu himself would disagree with this last point. I will let him have the last word: 'All the saints are of one mind; 'tis those in the midst of the way who follow diverse paths.'<sup>36</sup>

## Notes and References

1. See *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 4.335.
2. S K Shrivastava, 'Advaita in Hindi', *Advaita Vedanta*, History of Science, Philosophy, and

Culture in Indian Civilization, ed. R Balasubramaniam, 11 vols (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000), Volume 2, Part 2, 590.

3. For details of this argument, see Michael S Allen, 'Greater Advaita Vedānta: The Case of Nīścaldās', *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 21/3 (December 2017), 275–97 and Michael S Allen, 'Greater Advaita Vedānta: The Case of Sundarās', *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Forthcoming.
4. Raghavadasa, *Bhaktamal*, 584.
5. *Complete Works*, 4.335.
6. The brief sketch of Dadu's life in this section is based primarily on Jana Gopal's *Janmalila*. See Winand M Callewaert, *The Hindī Biography of Dādū Dayāl* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988).
7. *The Hindī Biography of Dādū Dayāl*, 18–9.
8. See W G Orr, *A Sixteenth-Century Indian Mystic* (London: Lutterworth, 1947), K N Upadhyaya, *Dadu: The Compassionate Mystic* (Beas: Radha Soami Satsang, 1979), and Monika Thiel-Horstmann, *Crossing the Ocean of Existence: Braj Bhāṣā Religious Poetry from Rajasthan: A Reader* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983).
9. Dadu, *Pads*, 8.1.4: 'Sabadi samamna sanamusha rahai, para-atama age / dadu sijhe deshatam, avinasi lage.' Text and translation from *Crossing the Ocean of Existence*, 68–9.
10. *Pads*, 10.1.4: 'Nribhai [sic] taham bhai ko nahim, bilasai barambara / dadu darasana dijiye, sanamusha sirajanahara'; *Crossing the Ocean of Existence*, 75.
11. Dadu, *Sakhis*, 4, *Parcha kau ang*, 41–2: 'Jaham ramma taham maim nahim, maim taham namhim ramma / dadu mahala barika hai, dvai kum nahim thamma. Maim namhim taham maim gaya, ekai dusara namhim / namhi ko thahara ghanim, dadu nija ghara mambim.' Text from the critical edition of Govind Rajneesh, *Dadu Samagra* (Hindi), 2 vols (Delhi: Amar Satya, 2007), 2.122. Translation from *A Sixteenth-Century Indian Mystic*, 98.
12. *Sakhis*, 6, *Hairamn kau ang*, 23–4: 'Na taham chupa na bolanam, maim taim namhim koi / dadu apa para nahim, na taham eka na doi. Eka kabaum tau doi hai, doi kabaum tau eka / yum dadu hairamna hai, jyum hai tyum hi dekha. Dadu Samagra, 2.206; *A Sixteenth-Century Indian Mystic*, 101.
13. Such an interpretation is not as unlikely as it

- might seem. Orr argues that Dadu's spiritual teacher, the mysterious old man who initiated him, was a Sufi shaiikh. See *A Sixteenth-Century Indian Mystic*, 52–6.
14. *Sources of Indian Tradition*, eds Ainslie Thomas Embree, Stephen N Hay, and Wm. Theodore De Bary, 2 vols (New York: Columbia University, 1988), 1.424.
  15. See Shantiswarup Tripathi, *Shankar Advait Vedant ka Nirgun Kavya par Prabhav* (Hindi) (Delhi: Ranjit), 351–2.
  16. See S K Mishra, *Sant Dadudayal aur Madhyakalin Bhaktikavya* (Hindi) (Delhi: Pramod, 1985), 31–5, 43–5.
  17. *A Sixteenth-Century Indian Mystic*, 156.
  18. The quotation is from the opening of one of Dadu's *pads*, 174 or 175 in most editions: '*Apa niranjana yaum kabai, kirati karatara / maim jana sevaga dvai nabim, ekai anga sara.*' *Dadu Samagra*, 1.177.
  19. *A Sixteenth-Century Indian Mystic*, 157.
  20. For more on Sundaradasa's life and his relationship to Advaita Vedanta, see 'Greater Advaita Vedānta: The Case of Sundarādās'.
  21. Sundaradasa, *Jnana-samudra*, 1.32: '*Hai chidananda ghana brahma tum soi / deha samyoga jivatva bhrama hoi. Jagata hu sakala yaha anachatau janau / janama aru marana saba swapna kari manau.*' Text from Purohit Harinarayan Sharma, *Sundar-granthavali* (Hindi), 2 vols (Calcutta: Raghunath Prasad Singhanian, 1937), 1.13. Translation mine.
  22. See *Jnana-samudra*, 5.4–7.
  23. Sundaradasa, *Gitak*, 7: '*Rajju mambim jaisaim sarpa bhasai sipa maim rupau yatha / mriga trishnika jala buddhi deshahi bishva mithya hai tatha. Jini labhyau brahma akhanda pada advaita saba hi thama hai / dadudayala prasiddha sadguru tabi mora pranama hai.*' *Dadu-granthavali*, 1.250. Translation mine.
  24. Raghavadasa, *Bhaktamal*, 584: '*Shankaracharya dusaro, dadu ke sundara bhayo / dvaitabhava kara dura, eka advaita hi gayo.*' Translation mine.
  25. T R V Murti, 'Introductory Words', S K Shrivastava, *The Essential Advaitism: The Philosophy of Nishchaladasa* (Varanasi: Kishor Vidya Niketan, 1980), xi.
  26. For details of the life of Nishchaladasa, see 'Greater Advaita Vedānta: The Case of Nishchalādās'.
  27. Nishchaladasa, *Vichara-sagara*, 4.84, auto-commentary: '*Buddhimaim jo chidabbhas au buddhika adhishtan-chetan donumvamka nam jiv hai.*' Translation mine.
  28. *Vichara-sagara*, 7.116–7: '*Jnani mukti videhamaim, jasaum hoya abhedha / dadu adurupa so, jahi bakhanata veda. Namarupa vyabhicharimaim, anugata eka anupa / dadupadako lachchya hai, astibhatipriyarupa.*' Translation mine.
  29. See Sadhu Nishcaldas, *Jewel Garland of Inquiry*, ed. Ramana Maharshi (Tiruvannamalai: Ramanasramam, 1984).
  30. See *Vichara Sagaram in Sanskrit: A Treatise in Advaita Philosophy*, trans. Vasudeva Brahmenendra Sarasvati (Mayiladuthurai: Vasudeva Brahmenendra Sarasvathi Swamigal Library Committee, 1986).
  31. *Shri Dadu Bani*, ed. C P Tripathi (Varanasi: Santa Sahitya Academy, 1985), 3: '*Daduji ki vani ka arth achchhi tarah se samajhne ke liye vedant ki prakriya ka jnan atyavashyak hai. Vedant ki prakriya dadupanthi sadhu pandit nishchaladas krit vicharsagar aur vritti-prabhakar granthom maim babut uttam riti se di gai hai ... jo mahashay vedant prakriya ko achchhi tarah se samajhte hain unke liye dayal ji ki vani ka tatparya samajhna kuchh kathin nahim hai.*' Translation mine.
  32. *Sakhis*, 4, *Parcha kau ang*, 171a, 175a in Mangaldas's edition: '*Atama asana ramma ka, tabam basai bhagavana.*' *Dadu Samagra*, 2.153. Translation mine.
  33. *Shridadudayal-ji ki vani* (Jaipur: Jayaramdas Swami Bhishagacharya, 1951), 118.
  34. *Shri Dadu Vani* (Jaipur: Dadu Mahavidyalaya), 171: '*Jiv aur brahm donom chetan hone se ek haim aur jad drishya rup samsar chetan ka vivart hai atah dvait siddh nahim hota.*' Translation mine.
  35. For example, the Sikh Udasi and Nirmala *sampradayas*, much like the Dadu Panth, came to read the *Guru-granth Sahib* through the lens of Advaita Vedanta; but their interpretive traditions are quite distinct from those of Khalsa Sikhs, and this suggests that the process of Vedanticisation, while widespread in early modern north India, was not inevitable.
  36. *Sakhis*, 13, *Sach kau ang*, 165: '*Saba sadbaum ka eka mata, e bichake baraha bata.*' *Dadu Samagra*, 2.354; *A Sixteenth-Century Indian Mystic*, 93.

# ***Beyond the Brain—The Impact of Advaita Philosophy on Consciousness Studies***

**Dr Sangeetha Menon**

**B**RAIN SCIENCES AND SCANNING technologies have developed well in the last ten years that today, we have better knowledge about how the brain functions, though we are far from unravelling the mystery of its workings in totality. The last decade brought in remarkable insights about the relation between, mind, consciousness, and the brain through the understanding of cognitive capabilities. But what we still have no clue about is how does a bulbous wrinkled mass of tissue bring out the emergence of the qualitative nature of the self and the person we are, and what is the true nature of consciousness.

The questions we ask about consciousness are based on different kinds of experience, dream, states of mind, memory, emotions, and the like. But the method to respond to these questions are guided by segregated information about behaviour or brain events and processes. Therefore, the answers to these questions are given in terms of neural correlates and neural information processing and models thereof. This method takes away and ignores the essential aspect of 'being conscious' or 'consciousness' which is the 'person' and the subjective self that is capable of transcendence.

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The mystery about consciousness is that all that we know about in a limited manner is that the brain is ruled by its electrochemical functions and neural wirings and connections. But how such functional, discrete and quantitative constituents bind together and give rise to the subjective, qualitative, and unitary experience of 'I am' is a mind-boggling question for science. Such a puzzling divide was first introduced by the theory of 'easy problems and hard problem' of David Chalmers.<sup>1</sup> It made a semantic distinction between 'being conscious' and 'what is responsible for consciousness', which otherwise for mainstream neuroscience are identical.

Mainstream science approaches consciousness mostly from a dualistic point of view or a reductionist approach. According to dualist theories the subjective nature of consciousness can never be understood by science. The perceptual aspects of consciousness are vision, hearing, and the like. The reductionist approach is that there is nothing called the personal aspect or subjective nature for consciousness, since all of that are just the products or representations of neural functions. The non-dual vision connecting subjective experience and consciousness as theorised by Advaita Vedanta becomes pertinent in this context when the fundamental riddle for the contemporary interdisciplinary discussions and neuroscience is how to **give an equal place** to human experience, as well as the functional nature of brain.

### Irreducibility of Consciousness

According to the Advaita vision, Brahman is the fundamental reality underlying all objects and experiences and it is described as pure existence, pure consciousness, and pure bliss. All forms of existence presuppose a knowing self. Pure consciousness underlies the knowing self. Consciousness according to Advaita metaphysics, unlike the positions held by other Vedānta schools, is not a property of Brahman but its very nature. The independent existence and experience of the world ceases to be with the gain of knowledge of Brahman. The nature of knowledge of Brahman is that 'I am pure consciousness'. Pure consciousness is not only pure existence but also the ultimate bliss, which is experienced partially during deep sleep.

According to Advaita epistemology, there is a fourfold process of perception: the physical object, the sense organ, the mind, *antahkarana*, and the cognising self, *pramata*. The cognising self is self-luminous and the rest of the components are not self-luminous, being devoid of consciousness. The mind and the sense organs connect the cognising self to the object. The self alone is the knower and the rest are knowable as objects of knowledge. It is the mind that helps to distinguish between various perceptions.

The subject knows and the object is known because of the self-luminous, *svatah-prakasha*, nature of pure consciousness. In his commentary on the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, Acharya Shankara, says that 'consciousness is the very nature of the Self and inseparable from it'.<sup>2</sup> The cognising self, the known object, the object-knowledge, and the valid means of knowledge, *pramana*, are essentially the manifestations of one pure consciousness. Such a unitary theory of pure consciousness helps to establish the non-dual relation between experience and the transcendental nature of consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

In the current discussions on consciousness, which are heavily influenced by the scientific methodology, the challenge is that it is difficult to understand the two varied expressions of consciousness such as the perceptual experiences and its transcendental nature as the continuing Self, because they are different in terms of their production, function, and evolution. Much of the discussion in the circles of philosophy and science is centered on the intentional mode of consciousness and its production or qualitative nature.<sup>4</sup>

What is ignored in the reductionist approaches is that often human life is guided by the social and psychological ways of responding to situations and the unintentional consequences of human actions.<sup>5</sup> The intentional act and thinking and the non-intentional act and thinking: both have meaning, when we look at the human mind, since they are co-coordinated, structured, and are given continuity by their belonging to an 'I-ness'. This I-ness is irreducible. Both the intentional and non-intentional acts and thinking could come under the purview of philosophical and neurobiological analysis. But the 'irreducible I-ness' is transcendental to even a meta-level of understanding and is purely experiential and Self-oriented.

What is often attempted to understand consciousness is reducing consciousness to mere cognitive functions. Reductionism could work only in the level of intentionality and intentional acts and not the non-intentional nature of pure consciousness. The irreducibility of 'I-ness' is better appreciated if we consider the 'integral' mode of consciousness.<sup>6</sup> We not only intend to cognise and experience, we also integrate that which is known and experienced, to a transcendental self. What is beside both the intending and the integrating functions is the I-ness that is irreducible. Acharya Shankara's commentary on

the thirteenth chapter of the Gita, in a deeper and connected manner, brings in the interrelations between *kshetra*, the field, and the *kshetrajna*, the knower of the field, and how the source of *kshetrajna* is traced to pure consciousness, which is the nature of the true self.

### Consciousness and Non-dualism

Acharya Shankara gives the concept of 'experience' adequate importance and place for discussion. At the same time, he presents a fundamental theory of the experiencer deploying the phenomenology of the three states of experience—waking, dream, and deep sleep. Advaita posits the highest truth and reality as 'something-which-is-already-there'. This 'something-which-is-already-there' is designated by Acharya Shankara variously as *aham*, *bodha*, *chit*, and the famous Atman and Brahman. He uses three distinct categories, along with his adherence to *shabda*, to explicate cognitive functions as well as the role of consciousness.

The cognitive mechanism involves a subject who knows, *pramata chaitanya*; the process of knowledge, *pramana chaitanya*; and the object known, *vishaya chaitanya*. These three components are involved in the cognitive mechanism starting from the sensory level to the final conceptual level. Acharya Shankara employs a multifunctional term called *antahkarana*, which receives and arranges sense data. The *antahkarana* assumes different functions in conjunction with different trans-cognitive entities, which are classified under the name *vritti*, which are of four different kinds such as *samkalpa*, pre-decisive state; *nishchaya*, decisive state;<sup>7</sup> *garva*, self-consciousness; and *smarana*, remembrance. *Antahkarana*,



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using these four functions takes up the form of *manas*, mind; *buddhi*, discerning faculty; *ahamkara*, ego;<sup>8</sup> and *chitta*, mind-stuff respectively.

The existential, *sat*, and reflective nature, *chit*, of the Atman, pure consciousness, unites with the *buddhi* to give rise to the experience 'I know'.<sup>9</sup> The cognitive mechanism is explained to include the process of sensation, percept formation, and conceptualisation. Sensation and conceptualisation together help the *ahamkara* to 'see' the form, *rupa*, of the object which is already defined, *nama*, perceptually. The reality of I-ness is explained further. Acharya Shankara contends that the mind and senses are of the nature of name and form and are material.<sup>10</sup> According to his explanation of the cognitive mechanism, *ahamkara*, which can be roughly translated as 'ego', is also a modification of the 'internal organ'.

Acharya Shankara employs the theory of representationism by the two methods of 'reflection' and 'proximity' to explain both the phenomenological transformation of a non-conscious material entity, *ahamkara*, as well as to maintain a definite dualistic position so as to highlight the distinctive nature of consciousness. He says that modifications of *antahkarana* are pervaded by the reflection of consciousness, as they come

to exist.<sup>11</sup> Using the illustration of a jewel and a lamp, Acharya Shankara distinguishes the nature of consciousness from that of modifications. Just as a jewel differs in colour due to the proximity of coloured objects, consciousness appears according to the different modifications associated with it.

Pure I-ness never undergoes modification and intellect is never endowed with knowledge. *Vrittis* are manifested, known and endowed with existence by consciousness which is immediately known and different from them, like the lamp illuminating other objects. An agent, a means of knowledge, and an object are necessary in the experience of the knower, knowledge, and the known. In order to avoid an infinite regress, it cannot be said that each of these three can prove its own existence. The agency of the agent exhausted in proving its own existence will not be available to prove the existence of the means of knowledge and the object at the same time.<sup>12</sup>

What is intended to be governed by the action of an agent is the object of that action. Therefore, the object depends on the agent and not on consciousness which is other than it. Acharya Shankara delineates consciousness by any functional role.<sup>13</sup> To extend the immutability of consciousness and mutability of the internal organ to the dream state, he introduces 'memory'. It is the same intellect which is modified differently in the waking state, which takes up various modifications in the dream state too. Thus the dream objects are seen and remembered later. Consciousness witnesses modifications as it pervades them in both waking and dream states.<sup>14</sup>

### **Understanding the I-ness**

Acharya Shankara explains I-ness experienced from two different contexts, one which involves dualistic interpretations and the other

reductionist. It is also presumed by him that I-ness involves three phases through which it gets defined. The first phase is the intentional phase, which directs a self-consciousness towards an object, expressed as *ahamkara*, which leads to the second phase which that a variety of agencies according to the object of experience. It is in this phase that I-ness gets defined as the 'intensor' so as to have specific interactions, of which a few instances can be 'I am dumb', 'I am happy', 'I am sad', and so on.

In this phase, I-ness is the custodian of personal choices, desires, ambitions, and the like. The second phase involves the identification of I-ness with one's thought patterns and emergence of two intricate and foundational subjective experiences of definite 'I-ness', 'I am this', and 'mine-ness', 'this is mine'. Though the first and second phase are hierarchical, the temporal gap between these two being almost not recognisable, the intentional phase and the intensor phase are simultaneously experienced in any experience. Thus, any immediate sense that accompanies an experience is my experience, than distinguishing the I-ness in it, and the changing nature of experiential content.

Acharya Shankara holds that consciousness is dynamic in that it entails differentiation and integration of experiences. The level of differentiation could be explained by cognitive functions and further conceptualisation. But to understand the functions of integration, third person accounts are not sufficient. The 'transcendence' of I-ness from cognitive to experiential level has to be contextualised in an ontological field where subjectiveness or I-consciousness is placed in its pure form.

Acharya Shankara substantiates the ontological phase of I-ness with the help of *shabda pramana*, verbal testimony. He attempts a categorical explanation concurrently using specific



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terms which indicates his adherence to not any single semantic position. *Shabda* is often employed as a trans-linguistic tool. In the *Laghu Vakyavritti*, Acharya Shankara elaborates the three states of consciousness.<sup>15</sup> The physical body or bodily I-ness, *sthula sharira*, is the first presentation of I-ness. The second is the subtle body, *sukshma sharira*, of latent attitudes, motor and sense organs, vital airs, intellect, and mind. The third is the causal body which is the I-ness identified with physical and subtle bodies in its abstractness. The deep sleep state is devoid of any cognitive activity but possesses I-ness in its pure form.

The ontological thesis of Acharya Shankara upholds I-consciousness as ‘something-which-is-already-there’. ‘It is there across, above, below, full, existence, knowledge, bliss, non-dual, infinite, eternal, and one.’<sup>16</sup> Acharya Shankara

interprets the pramana of *shabda* as a transformative tool which can give as well as transcend the known functions of a ‘word meaning’. *Shabda* is used as a trans-linguistic tool ‘not to create knowledge but to eliminate false knowledge’. This is because pure I-ness needs no other consciousness to make itself known, its nature being consciousness. According to Acharya Shankara *shabda* becomes valid by merely removing the characteristics attributed to the Atman and not by making known what is unknown.<sup>17</sup> Also because pure consciousness never becomes non-existent and is not capable of being produced by the act of an agent.

The knowledge about the Self is different from other kinds of knowledge by being the only means for the liberation of the person. The puzzle is whether it is an experience in space and time like any other experience or of another



kind or is it a cognition of a certain experience. Moksha is not explained in direct terms but the student is encouraged to think about the metaphysical status of the 'present' and 'given' experience which is dualistic, *raga dveshati sankulah*, but still originating from the experiencer.

This is Acharya Shankara's most famous explanation of maya: '*Svakale satyavat bhati prabhode satyasat bhavet*; it appears to be real as long as it continues and is falsified on waking up.'<sup>18</sup> The 'other', which is the basic epistemological component of experience, appears to be having an independent existence when 'I' mistake my identity to be defined by the 'other'. When 'I' awake to my true 'Self' from the slumber of identity or identities it is seen that the existence of the 'other' no more defines my existence. The 'other' corresponds to the responses, likes and dislikes, and basic attitudes, identity and difference, by which we relate to objects, people, and events and not objects, people and events by themselves. That is the reason why the analysis of the basic epistemological component of experience, namely duality, is to be understood from the point of view of the experiencer.

The pure I, Atman cannot be accepted or rejected by itself or others, nor does it accept or reject anyone else. Acharya Shankara takes a non-reductionist stand in holding that any experience to be possible should have an agent, specific I-ness, and a corresponding object. An experience is intelligible only in terms of these dualities. The object of experience as well as the agent of the specific experience are both modifications of the *antahkarana*. But these material evolutes gain a phenomenological meaning of being 'experienced' and 'experiencing' because of the non-conditional proximity of consciousness. The object experienced and the specific agent or experiencer of that object are relative and co-existent. One has meaning only


in terms of the other, and one cannot become the other.

According to the reductionism advocated by Acharya Shankara, we have to delve into the various levels of I-consciousness keeping aside its cognitive content. The I-ness, which is pervaded by the reflective consciousness, is called the knower or agent of the act of knowing. Pure consciousness is distinct from these three—action, agent, and the means of action. Different epistemic modes like 'right knowledge', 'doubtful knowledge', and 'false knowledge' are prone to change. But they are all pervaded by pure consciousness. Pure consciousness manifests modifications without itself undergoing any change.

Differences in I-ness, instances of specific I-ness, are due to the modifications of the cognitive organ. Since consciousness is best known through one's being conscious, I-consciousness has a major role in defining the parameters of 'consciousness', which is otherwise yet another cognitive term. Acharya Shankara adheres to the methods of reductionism and non-reductionism from two different standpoints. At the same time, he maintains a theory of consciousness, emerging from the tension between these two standpoints.

The *antahkarana* undergoes modification and is subject to physical laws. But pure consciousness cannot be subjected to the change undergone by material objects including the mind. Acharya Shankara emphasises that the phenomenological meaning of I-ness, experience, and ontological primacy of I-ness, self-transcendence, are not opposed to each other, but are nondual. When on the one hand the neural correlates of consciousness give us better insights into the workings of the mind, on the other hand, the same methods are not adequate to present the transcendental dimensions of consciousness.

The current approaches on 'consciousness'

focus on either of two problems. First, how simple physiological functions coordinate and work together as one single system and second, how and why a subjective orientation arises for experience. In the first case, the attempt is to build into 'consciousness' and in the second case, the attempt is to build from 'Self'. Categories of thinking needed for the two cases are different, one is for the allocation of new knowledge within a system, and the other is for transformation of knowledge integrally and lead to self-transcendence. Experience is the common concern for both the approaches. But in the first discussion the focus is on the empirical and however complex a third-person representation of the neural function it can generate, it cannot be the same as experiential. The neural cannot transform to become the experiential. Herein lies the major gap between first-person and third-person approaches to consciousness. 

## References

1. See David J Chalmers, 'The Puzzle of Conscious Experience', *Scientific American*, 273/6 (December 1995), 80–6.
2. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, 2.1.1: '*Svarupa-avyatirekena*'. The translation is from Karl H Potter, *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies*, 25 vols (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2019), 3.211.
3. See Sangeetha Menon, 'Advaita Vedanta', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://www.iep.utm.edu/adv-veda/>> accessed 29 November 2019.
4. See *The View from Within: First Person Approaches to Consciousness*, ed. Francisco Varela and Jonathan Shear (Thorverton: Imprint Academic, 2002).
5. See Acharya Shankara's introduction to his commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*.
6. See Acharya Shankara's commentary on the thirteenth chapter of the *Bhagavadgita*.
7. See Acharya Shankara, *Upadesha-sahasri*, 2.16.21: '*Sankalpa-adhyavasayau tu manobudhaya-yatha kramat*'; the peculiar characteristic of the mind is reflection and that of the intellect is determination.'
8. 'Ego' is to be differentiated from 'I-ness' which is further explained.
9. See Acharya Shankara, *Atmabodha*, 24: '*Atmanah sachchidamshashcha buddher-vrittir-iti dvayam, samyojya cha-avivekena janamiti pravartate*'; such a notion as "I know" is produced by the union, due to non-discernment, of a modification of the mind with two aspects of Atman, namely, Existence and Consciousness.'
10. See *Upadesha-sahasri*, 1.1.22: '*Manashcha indriyani cha namarupatmakam*'; the mind and the senses are also of the nature of name and form.'
11. See *Upadesha-sahasri*, 2.5.4: '*Chaitanya pratibimbena vyaptah bodho hi jayate*'; the modifications of the intellect are pervaded by the reflection of Consciousness when they come to exist.'
12. See *Upadesha-sahasri*, 2.18.131: '*Atmano grabhane chapi trayanamih sambhavad, atmany-asaktakartritvam na syat-karana-karm anoh*'.
13. See Sangeetha Menon, 'Towards a Sankarite Approach to Consciousness Studies: A Discussion in the Context of Recent Interdisciplinary Scientific Perspectives', *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, 18/1 (January 2001), 95–111 <[https://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/i\\_es/i\\_es\\_menon\\_sankar\\_frameset.htm](https://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/i_es/i_es_menon_sankar_frameset.htm)> accessed 29 November 2019.
14. See *Upadesha-sahasri*, 2.14.6: '*Drashtitvam cha drishetad-vyaptih syaddhiya udbhave*'; the Self is said to witness the modifications of the intellect as it pervades them whenever they arise.'
15. See Acharya Shankara, *Laghu Vakyavritti*, 4: '*Jagara-svapnayorevam bodhabhasa-vidambana suptau tu tallaye shuddha-bodho jadyam prakashayet*'; the relational activities of the reflected consciousness are restricted to the two states of waking and dreaming, whereas in deep sleep the reflected consciousness itself together with the reflector, the intellect, being absorbed in ignorance, the pure consciousness shines only upon ignorance.'
16. *Atmabodha*, 56.
17. See Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Gita*, 2.18: '*Atad-dharma-adhyaropanam-atranivartakatvena pramanatvam atmanah pratipadyate, na tu ajnata-artha-jnapakatvena*'.
18. *Atmabodha*, 6.

# Advaita Darshanam: The Vision of Oneness

Swami Bodhananda

ADVAITA VEDANTA, AS EXPOUNDED systematically by Acharya Shankara, is considered the epitome of the Vedic enterprise. Acharya Shankara, based on his deep reflection on the Upanishadic revelations and readings of the Buddhist, Sankhya, yoga, and Nyaya systems, and drawing significantly from his orthodox and ritualistic background, formulated his vision of oneness as a comprehensive system of thought and discipline of spiritual practice. His critique of rival systems is incisive and insightful.

Acharya Shankara cleaned up and simplified orthodox ritualism and popular worship and presented them as means of attaining inner purity and psychic focus. He organised Hindus under four 'monasteries' and ten 'spiritual orders'. Acharya Shankara also renovated many Hindu temples, prescribed six deities for worship, and instituted the *shodashopachara*, sixteen-item worship and *panchopachara*, the five-item worship, puja methods that the majority of Hindus follow today. Acharya Shankara was a scholar, philosopher, yogi, commentator, debater, writer, poet, organiser, institution builder, trainer, leader, and above all a spiritually enlightened master. Acharya Shankara is the central pillar of Hindu Dharma, as we know it today.

There has been a long unbroken succession of

Advaita masters beginning from the Vedic times down to the twenty-first century—Yajnavalkya, Janaka, Ashtavakra, Uddalaka, Veda Vyasa, Acharya Gaudapada, Acharya Govindapada, Acharya Shankara, Acharya Padmapada, Vachaspati Misra, Madhusudana Sarasvati, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Shivananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Maharshi Aurobindo, Ramana Maharshi, Narayana Guru, Swami Chinmayananda, Swami Dayananda, and many more.

It was Acharya Shankaracharya who determined the scriptural foundations of Advaita. Otherwise known as *pramana granthas*, source texts, they are three, the Upanishads, mainly ten of them; the Bhagavadgita having seven hundred verses; and the *Brahma Sutra* having 555 sutras. Together they constitute the *prasthanatrayi*, the three sections, the ultimate source of Advaita spiritual wisdom. A correct interpretation of these texts requires linguistic, logical, and contemplative skills.

Advaita radically differs from other Vedantic traditions like Vishishtadvaita, Dvaita, Shuddhadvaita, Dvaitadvaita, Shunya Advaita, and Samanvaya Advaita, though all these traditions draw their insights from the same source books. Modern Hinduism is firmly anchored in the Advaita vision expounded by Acharya Shankara, be it the path of bhakti, yoga, karma, or jnana. All reforms, renaissance, spiritual, and political movements, subsequent to the Islamic and European invasions, beginning with Guru Nanak, Kabir, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda, Raja Ram

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Mohan Roy, and Subramania Bharati, were inspired by the universal vision of Advaita. Advaita is the central principle around which the Hindu society coalesces and finds its purpose, meaning, sustenance, and inspiration.

Dalit thinkers and reformers like Mahatma Phule, Narayana Guru, Ayyankali and Dr B R Ambedkar sourced their vision for an egalitarian and just society to the Advaita philosophy. The bhakti movement of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries that became a bulwark against Islamic onslaught was a robust collective expression of Advaita experience.

The Advaita vision, its systematic teaching and practice and its applications in various domains of human activity, is the greatest contribution of Hinduism and India to humanity at large.

Advaita is a living tradition and its teaching and practice requires constant lived interactions, experimentations, and interpretations. Only a living guru can fill such a dynamic role. A guru can be compared to a coach, mentor, guide, instructor, friend, facilitator, moderator, director, leader, competitor, challenger, role model, and motivator, or all their functions rolled into one super figure. The scriptures define a guru as 'well trained' and 'deeply established.' The guru is wisdom incarnate and walks the talk. The guru lives in the midst of daily turmoil, interprets personal and collective experiences, and constructs meaning for purposeful action. Sri Krishna, Buddha, Vyasa, Acharya Shankara, Mahatma Gandhi—all fall in this calibre of gurus.

What is Advaita? Acharya Shankara succinctly puts it in this famous formulation: '*Brahma satyam, jagan mithya; jivo brahma eva naparah*'; Brahman, boundless consciousness, alone is true; the ever changing objective world is an appearance of that Brahman; the subjective embodied perceiver, of the world, is identical with Brahman.<sup>1</sup>

Great Upanishadic pronouncements or *mahavakyas* like, '*Tattvamasi*; you are that',<sup>2</sup> '*Prajnanam Brahma*; consciousness is Brahman',<sup>3</sup> '*Aham brahmasmi*; I am Brahman',<sup>4</sup> '*Ayam atma brahma*; this Atman is Brahman',<sup>5</sup> '*Sarvam khalu idam brahma*, indeed all this is Brahman',<sup>6</sup> '*Satyam jnanam anantam brahma*; Brahman is truth, knowledge, and infinite',<sup>7</sup> '*Vacharambanam vikaro namadheyam mrittiketyeva satyam*; all transformation has speech as its basis and it is only name, earth as such is the reality',<sup>8</sup> and so on, are the guiding lights of Advaita vision, values, and practice.

The *Brahma Sutra* begins with the exhortation, 'thereafter, therefore, [let us] begin inquiry into Brahman'<sup>9</sup> and goes on to define the *tatastha* Brahman as 'the substratum from which the world emerges, in which it exists, and into which it resolves' (1.1.2.). Here, 'thereafter' points to seeker's qualification and 'therefore' to her or his intent. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* also defines the *svarupa*, nature of Brahman as 'truth, consciousness, eternal, and bliss'.<sup>10</sup> These words are not adjectives, *visheshana*, but only indicative, *lakshana*, definitions of brahman.

Advaita proposes that the ultimate goal of human life is moksha, *moha-kshayam*, the annihilation of delusion, that is, ending of self-ignorance and the attainment of unlimited happiness. Advaita also reveals that unlimited happiness is the nature of the self of the seeker of happiness. Limited happiness is pleasure, *bhoga sukha*, gained from indulgence in sense objects. Limitless happiness, *yoga sukha*, is realised in contemplative states guided by the identity statements, *mahavakyas*, of the Upanishads.

Advaita aims at a deeper cognitive shift from the 'me', small 'i' to the 'we', collective 'i-i-i-i-i ...', to the transcendental, big 'I' perspective. This shift happens while listening, *shravana*, intently to scriptural statements expounded by a living

enlightened master. Perspectives are formed by past experiences organised and stored in the memory cells as sequences of words and images. These perspectives and interpretative tools can be changed and refashioned by apt words and imageries employed by an expert master craft-person established in Brahman.

Advaita contemplation is pivoted on the ontological given-ness of Brahman. For this a priori assumption, the Advaita tradition takes inspiration from scriptural authority, logical analysis, and life experiences. All the major ten Upanishads in unison declare that Brahman is the ultimate invariable truth and that 'the knower of Brahman is Brahman'.<sup>11</sup> Upanishads reveal Brahman not as an objective reality, but as a deeply subjective experiential self. The embodied, subjective, invariable, self-experience of the agent, in the midst of the welter of objective variable experiences, is Brahman. Logically, Brahman cannot be any or all of the ever changing objects of the world. At the same time, for change to occur and be experienced requires a changeless substratum. Thus, the ever changing world of material objects and mental events imply Brahman as the substratum.

So too, a person's search in this ever changing world for security, peace, and happiness ends in utter futility. As a result, one becomes detached and reflective, reformulates questions, and re-directs the arrow of enquiry. Such is the fertile soil where the wisdom seeds of Advaita sprout. Thus, listening, *shravana*, to the statements of the Advaita scriptures removes the ignorance of Brahman, discerning reflection, *manana*, removes doubts about Brahman and constant practice to abide, *nididhyasana*, liquidates unconscious habits that eclipse the vision of Brahman.

The main thrust of the Upanishads is to reveal the identity of Brahman with the experiencing self of the enquirer. The given-ness,

*vastu-ta*, or the existence of Brahman is a logical necessity and an ontological reality, and enjoys experiential proof, *anubhava-avasatanvat*. The clinching proof of the ontological given-ness of Brahman is the experience of enlightened masters and their ability to transfer this experience through systematic teaching and practices. *Brahma-vidya* or self-knowledge is a self-transforming cognitive experience. As the knowledge dawns, the fearful, unhappy, insecure individual, encased in the body-I am- attitude, realises herself or himself as the immortal, ever happy, all bodies accommodating consciousness. Like even the sunrise lifts the mist and reveals the splendour of the valley.

The living world's pursuit for happiness is natural and not cultivated. When it comes to the human, this pursuit becomes more poignant and sophisticated. The human being is a born seeker-philosopher. The Sanskrit words for happiness are *sukham*, all-accommodating space, and *anandam*, overflowing bliss. Both words, nudging each other, indicate happiness, *sukham*, as an all-inclusive transcendence, that is, Brahman. Meaning, happiness is realisation of a dynamic, fluctuating, state of constant inclusion and transcendence. This dynamic equilibrium, samadhi, state is called Brahman. The individual's ceaseless search for security, knowledge, and happiness culminates in her or his self-realisation as Brahman.

The Upanishads present Brahman as the ultimate goal of human pursuit. Humanity's collective historical experience is that we have been always seeking happiness. Therefore, the scriptural Brahman cannot be other than the unlimited happiness that we all experientially seek. Hence, the Upanishads themselves declare that Brahman is limitless happiness. And the knower of Brahman is happy, nay happiness itself.

This analysis leads the enquirer to the next

question. Where is the locus of this Brahman, that is, limitless happiness? The *Aitareya Upanishad* declares: '*Prajna pratishtha, prajnanam brahma*; Consciousness is its end, Consciousness is Brahman.'<sup>12</sup> The knowing or experiencing awareness is the locus of Brahman. The contemplative, detached observer, free from the wasteful enterprises of seeking happiness in the world of sense objects, while actively involved in interactive relationships, through a transformative awakening, by progressively abandoning identifications with objects, body, senses, mind, intellect, memory, ego, knowledge, ignorance, pleasure, and pain, comes to abide in the true self as the foundational, illuminating awareness of all objective experiences. The all illuminating awareness, as pure consciousness, *chit*, is self-luminous, *svapakasham*. The locus of Brahman is the pivotal 'I' experience supporting all these experiences. 'Know Brahman hidden in the cave of the heart', advises the *Taittiriya Upanishad*.<sup>13</sup>

We find seven transformative movements in self-realisation:

1. The discovery that limitless happiness (LH) is the ultimate value.
2. LH is not the property of mental and material sense objects.
3. LH to be limitless has to be self-existing and inclusive and hence neither a product to be created nor opposed to dualistic experiences.
4. There is only one self-existing and inclusive being in the whole of experience and that is the self-luminous 'I' experience.
5. Self-luminosity is the nature of consciousness.
6. The conscious enquirer, the experiencing, doubting and questioning 'I', who is self-conscious and conscious of others, is the only source of consciousness.
7. Hence consciousness is limitless happiness and I am consciousness, happiness.

Advaita is not to be equated with philosophical monism, though they share some explanatory features. Monism, like Advaita, presents reality as one stuff that expresses in myriad forms. But in monistic thinking there is no mention of consciousness or bliss. The monistic stuff is drab, flat, dimensionless, and homogeneous, while Advaita Brahman is colourful, rich, complex and heterogeneous. Monism is an intellectual construct whereas Advaita is an experiential structure. Intellectual constructs are linear, simple, and neat, experiential structures are holistic, complex, and fussy. Monism is exclusive, Advaita is inclusive. For Monists, consciousness is a product and comes later, for Advaita consciousness is the source and primary. Advaita is engagement and bliss, monism is indifference and joyless.

Advaita promises embodied enlightenment or living bliss, *jivanmukti*, means freedom for the embodied, en-worlded self, living, interacting, receiving, processing, and responding to stimuli. In fact, dynamic interaction is a necessary condition for exploring dimensions of selves and developing efficiencies and expressing potentialities. In that sense enlightenment is a continuous process and not a onetime event. Enlightenment is the pouring out of the bliss of Brahman in and through the altruistic choices that networked individuals make in their interactive enterprises.

For the enlightened, mental and material events do not cover but only reveal Brahman. The world and Brahman are related like ring and gold or waves and the ocean. Acharya Shankara termed this relationship as between *satya*, real and *mithya* or maya, apparent.<sup>14</sup> The apparent is a category between the real and the unreal. Maya is contentless and is contained in Brahman.

Maya is to be equated with the Buddhist emptiness experience. Emptiness is the end point that intellect and intuition can reach. It is the contemplative, collective, long, unbroken

experiences of a race, scriptural wisdom, that can pierce the veil of maya and reveal the reality of Brahman. Hence, the importance of transferring *brahmavidya*, generation to generation, from an experienced guru to a qualified disciple. An anonymous couplet exclaims: 'The world is a dancing stage of Shiva, unfolded by Shiva out of himself. In this world dance, Shiva is the dancer, Shiva is the spectator, and Shiva is the stage,' exclaims an anonymous couplet.

In the Advaita vision, being is doing and doing is being, '*Karmani akarma darshanam, akarmani karma cha*; seeing inaction in action and action in inaction.'<sup>15</sup> Brahman is ceaseless activity, '*Varta eva cha karmani*; I am engaged in actions' (3.22). Metaphorically, Brahman is comparable to the ocean, '*Apuryamanam-achala pratishtam samudram*; ever-filled, steadily situated, ocean' (2.70). Ocean yields its water as vapour that becomes clouds, rains, rivulets, rivers that finally become ocean, to become clouds again. Maya is this incredible playfulness of Brahman.

'*So'kamayata*, Brahman desired', declares the *Taittiriya Upanishad*,<sup>16</sup> a desire to express, explode, expand, explore, and experience. This projection of Brahman is not out of any inadequacy, but out of overflowing fullness, '*Purnat purnam-udachyate*; from fullness, fullness is born'.<sup>17</sup> Brahman reveals and realises through the competing and coalescing desires, thoughts, and actions of networked individuals and groups, within the constraints of time, space, and resources.

This world of mind and matter is not antithetical to Brahman, but its primary expression as field for more complex self-revelations. The more Brahman reveals, the more it remains concealed. This process is not simple, monotonous, cyclical repetitions. Every revelation and every expression is new and wafts the fragrance of fresh blooms. In this self-expression, Brahman breaks and makes rational and verbal categories and

boundaries. It is a spectacle of speechless wonder.

The description is not the described. Advaita description is not Advaita experience. Therefore, Advaita invites competing and conflicting modalities of descriptions to fine tune contemplative understanding and experience of Brahman. Interacting with Buddhist, agnostic, atheistic, materialistic, pluralistic, dualistic, experimental, and experiential approaches with their competing truth claims and plethora of disciplinary protocols, Advaita fine tunes human understanding, relations, and actions to facilitate the Brahman project. Advaita is the midwife that eases the manifold incarnations of Brahman.

A universally asked question about the Advaita vision is that, if the individual jiva is Brahman in the deepest sense of consciousness, why there is ignorance, doubt, and suffering in the life of individuals. Can the solely and only existing Brahman suffer its own actions or the actions of the non-existing other? Is the individual a product of Brahman action or channel of Brahman action or Brahman action itself? According to Advaita, individual is indeed Brahman. Ignorance, doubt, and suffering are stages of Brahman strategies to challenge and be challenged in a dialectical process of self-revelation. The Sanskrit word for suffering is *duhkha*, constriction. Constriction is a device that provokes creative faculties and potentialities. While to the finite constriction is limiting, for the infinite, *purna* or *ananta*, constriction is un-limiting.

In the Advaita vision, Brahman is not so much an end point as it is the beginning point. Brahman is not to be reached, purified, modified, or produced. Brahman is not the object of knowledge, love, or action, but the very subject that knows, loves, and acts. '*Yat chakshusha na pashyati yena chakshumshi pashyati, tadeva brahma tvam viddhi, nedam yadidamupasate*; that which one does not see with the eye, that

by which one perceives the activities of the eye, know that alone to be Brahman and not what people worship as an object.<sup>18</sup> 'Brahman is not seen by the eyes, but sees through the eyes.'

Somehow a creepy notion has crept into the Vedanta circles that Brahman, the ultimate goal of human life, can be reached only after millions of life cycles of exclusive practices, and once reached the story ends there. Backward-to-Brahman practices not only entrench old habits and distort Brahman revelation, but also generate severe forms of delusionary neuroses and psychoses. Instead of enjoying self-expression, such practices end up in self-delusion, suffering, greed, and exploitation. Forward-with-Brahman proactive projects begin with the ontological commitment, *shraddha*, drawn from the scriptural teaching about the identity of Brahman with jiva, *jiva brahma aikyam*.

Taking the attitude that ignorance, desire, action, and attachment as structures to reflect and progressively realise Brahman, the individual integrates the world into her or his self-experience. Like a maestro musician integrates musical instrument to her or his self and expresses herself or himself through the instrument as lilting mellifluous music. Again the musician as a novice used the same instrument to develop her or his skills in music. While ascending to self-discovery and descending to self-expression, the musician uses the same facility.

Similarly, instead of fearing and shunning the world and looking for an elusive Brahman, in the caves of mountains, at the end of the rainbow, as Hindus have been pitifully doing for so long, putting it metaphorically, tying the horse of Brahman behind the cart of daily living, and in the process missing the joy of a happy ride and come to live a stagnant, retarded life, the Advaita clarion call is, 'Rise up, wake up, look in and out, think, act, interact, reveal, and realise your innate

Brahman.' '*Uttishthata jagrata prapya varan nibhodhata*; arise, awake, and learn by approaching the excellent ones.'<sup>19</sup> Brahman is not to be reached, Brahman is to be revealed; Brahman is not to be attained, Brahman is to be expressed; Brahman is not at the end, Brahman is at the very beginning. Brahman is not in the caves of mountains; Brahman is in the caves of our hearts, '*Yo veda nihitam guhayam*; one who knows that Brahman exists in the cave of the heart.'<sup>20</sup>

The *jivanmukta* experiences Brahman in all interactions. Her or his political, economic, social, artistic, and cultural activities are expressions of the infinite bliss of Brahman. Yajnavalkya was a twice-married householder. Janaka was a king. Vyadha was a meat seller. Ashtavakra was a hunchback mendicant. Pingala was a courtesan. But all of them were enlightened masters. Vyasa fathered children in his step sisters-in-law, Acharya Shankara was a lifelong celibate, and Buddha deserted his wife and infant son. All the three were great religious teachers and social organisers. Spiritual enlightenment and freedom is not from the world, but in the world. Brahman is in the manifested world, and at the same time beyond it. The *jivanmukta* lives happily in the world and not for happiness. The Gita uses the word *sthitaprajna* to indicate the 'happy-in-the-world-person' in contrast to 'for-happiness-in-the-world-person'.

There are four problematics that have been points of dogged arguments in the Advaita circles. These arguments help fine tune the experience of Brahman.

1. The locus of ignorance, *avidya*;
2. the status of the world, *loka*;
3. the efficacy of knowledge, *jnana*; and,
4. the importance of preceptor, guru.

In the hide and seek play of Brahman, intellect and ignorance play important roles. Ignorance is ignoring the subject, self, and focusing on the



object, world. '*Sva-svami-shaktyoh svarupopal-abdhi hetu sambandha*', that is, Brahman hiding, *sambandha* in embrace with its manifestation inwardly explored deeply and reveals itself anew.

Intellect is the seat of ignorance. That position raises a red flag in the logician's mind. How can intellect, a manifestation of Brahman, house ignorance that causes the manifestation in the first place. Therefore, they argue that ignorance's right location is Brahman itself. But the hitch is that Brahman cannot be ignorant. How can there be a dark patch in the sun, asks Advaita metaphorically. Ignorance is the extroverted, world-focussed mode of intellect and knowledge is contemplative, intuitive mode of intellect that realises the world as manifestation of Brahman.

Hence, ignorance is only an unreflective mode of intellect that is corrected by a reflective mode, created by listening to Advaita scriptures that reveal Brahman. The enquiry into ignorance liquidates ignorance, along with the very question and the ignorant questioner. The question dissolves without an answer. And Brahman reveals to the questioner as the blissful self. Some scholars take the position that Brahman being the substratum of intellect, that modifies as ignorance, has ignorance but is not ignorant following the logic that the possessor is not the possessed. Ignorance means room for growth and self-expression.

The status of the world is another problematic in Advaita. Is the world real or unreal? If the world is real, it won't change and if unreal, it won't be experienced. One branch of the Buddhists and some Vedantists, along with subjective idealists like Bishop Berkeley, argue that the world is unreal and is just a construct of the mind. Perception is just a representation, an interpretation, and not a presentation. Advaita doesn't hold this view that world is the creation of the individual mind. The tree that I see out

there is empirically present in the public space, for anyone with a healthy pair of eyes to see and relate. Hence the tree out there is not an individual's subjective, idiosyncratic creation, *esse est percipi*, *drishti srishhti*, but the presentation of an objectively existing tree, *srishhti drishti*, interpreted by the mind for private consumption.

If the world is unreal, its source Brahman also becomes unreal, which leads to nihilism, which is against the spirit of humanity and disgustingly tasteless, *anishtam*, undesirable. In the Advaita structuring of reality Brahman, consciousness, is absolute *paramarthika*, and the objective world is a web of relations, *vyavaharika*, and subjective interpretations are unique neurological events, *pratibhasika*. Metaphorically, they can be compared to gold ring and wedding ring. The value of wedding ring is imposed on the ring and the value of ring is imposed on gold and in fact gold alone is true. The *paramarthika* is the substratum of the *vyavaharika*, which in turn is the ground of *pratibhasika*.

The bitterest arguments are reserved for self-knowledge and its efficacy. According to some Vedanta scholars, just self-knowledge is not enough. You have to sweat the small stuff, make strenuous effort to realise the object of knowledge. Just as the knowledge of sugar doesn't sweeten your tea, knowledge of Brahman doesn't mean a bit unless the knower makes further efforts to get Brahman. This argument is true in the case of rituals or in the acquisition of powers or objects where the subject identifies with one of the limbs of a tripartite relationship of *karta*, *kriya*, *karma* or the doer, the action, and the result. In the tripartite state of awareness, there is ignorance of Brahman and the alienated Brahman becomes the object of search, to be known, sought after, and finally conquered, and added to the self. The unconscious, uninformed search for Brahman becomes the fruitless exertions of

rituals, sex, industry, politics, sports, and entertainments. Brahman is mistaken for heaven, pleasure, money, power, glory, and leisure. Those possessions have value in the context of Brahman, worthless devoid of self-awareness and Brahman knowledge.

Advaita presents Brahman as an accomplished, *siddha*, reality, non-separate, *ananya*, from the seeker, ignored but not lost. Hence, (i) the knowledge of Brahman is immediate, *aparoksha*; and (ii) '*Brahmaveda brahmaiva*, knowing is being.'<sup>21</sup> Knowing the pen in the pocket is ending the search and gain of the pen. Self-knowledge breaks out of the stranglehold of tripartite linearity. Intellect becomes a silent witness as the knower consciousness, known consciousness, and the knowing consciousness are realised as a seamless flow of pure blissful consciousness. The dichotomy of knowledge and praxis is operative only in the exclusive objective realm and not in the inclusive subjective realm.

Modern Vedantins are guru averse. They dislike submitting and exposing themselves. They are also suspicious of scriptures and intellectual disquisitions and linguistic exercises. They don't mind physical exercises like yoga, mountaineering, and surfing. Modern intellectuals are tired of their intellect and go for unaided explorations for the so-called intuition. Intuition is the new avatara of good old revelation and divine blessing. The ubiquitous example quoted for 'guruless enlightenment' is Ramana Maharshi. The entire spiritual literature of the world, time and again, insists on the importance of guru in self-realisation, but to suit the convenience of the moderns, one lone example is overemphasised, superseding all other testimonies.

Such a standalone example cannot be accepted as a reliable standard. The danger of waiting for and depending on the manna of spiritual intuition is that any crazy neurotic or psychotic

can come up with claims of self-realisation. And there would be no standard test or verification. Self-realisation becomes a cacophonous bazar of spurious spiritual stuff and outrageous personal claims. No doubt self-realisation is a unique flowering of the individual, *svadharma*, but it happens only in an interactive and intellectually challenging environment, *lokasamgraha*, and by an insightful abiding, *vritti jnana*, in Brahman. This requires a conjoined exercise of the intellect, emotions, body, neighbourhood, and nature, to untangle the mind and unleash the bliss and power of Brahman.

The guru is the living face of the collective wisdom of the entire race. The individual mind has to find its roots in collective wisdom to grow and flower. Epistemologically, it is the words of the guru that cause the neural change and the resultant cognitive shift. Solutions are always outside the problems. To exit a problem is to reorganise the problem. The guru and seeker in their dynamic relationship form a spiritual duet and through a process of mutual interrogation, guided by the scriptures, initiate relevant cognitive processes, *akhandakara vritti*, that opens the heart, buddhi, to the revelation of Brahman. Without this interrogative process, what the protagonist seeker achieves will be the stale artefacts spewed out by a private, undernourished, delusory, and megalomaniac mind. Enlightenment requires rigorous quality check.

One of the charges against Advaita is other-worldliness. Advocacy of values such as *viveka*, discernment; *vairagya*, detachment; *brahmacharya*, celibacy; *sannyasa*, renunciation; *ahimsa*, non-violence; and the espousal of a quality-less, characterless, faceless, desireless, and action-less Brahman has contributed to this popular notion about Advaita. The fact is that those terms are used to describe the indescribable profundity and affluence of Brahman.

Viveka means measure, judgement, and aesthetic sensitivity. Vairagya is a multi-perspective gaze. Brahmacharya is passionate, focussed pursuit of excellence. Sannyasa is connectivity and inclusiveness. Ahimsa is co-existence with dissent and differences. Desirelessness is self-givingness. Actionless-ness is enjoying action and unfolding through choices. The Brahman of Advaita is space-like inclusive consciousness. Brahman is not opposed to, but appears as the world. Being Brahman is doing Brahman. My self-realisation is entwined with other's self-realisation. Values and practices are double edged—they can enhance as well as inhibit. With a backward-to-Brahman mindset these values become inhibitive, but reinforced by forward-with-Brahman attitude they become exhibitivite and facilitative. Only a knower of Brahman can effectively and joyfully function in this world, engaging in self-giving, altruistic, teamwork. They are risk-takers, leaders, and path-makers. Advaita paves the way for real, sustainable, green enjoyment, and wellbeing of all, *sarvodaya*.

There are three areas that orthodoxy doesn't feel comfortable with Advaita. They are related to the belief in divine incarnation, image worship, and karma and rebirth. Though all the four dharma traditions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, hold these beliefs in differently nuanced forms, the Advaita take on them is fundamentally different. The goal of all dharmic traditions is freedom from the cycle of birth and death, from the causative flow of karma and the effects of karma. The incarnations, gurus, bodhisattvas and arhats help seekers in this process. For the Buddhist, the centre of the karmic whirl is empty. For the Jain, the Sikh, and most Hindus, at the centre it is a solid monad. For Advaita, the karma swirl is like clouds in the sky or waves in the ocean. And the centre is oceanic. Freedom in Advaita is not by the cessation of karma but by

engaging in karma playfully. Rebirth is the constant creation of self, the body-mind-memory-ego complex, in engagement with a dynamically changing phenomenal world. Advaita liberates the individual from identification with karma and the effects of karma. The *jivanmukta* plays with karma, becomes a master of gunas, combining and recombining these energies at will.

Advaita does advocate the idea of incarnation as emergency Brahman manifestation in time-space to replenish and revive the creation, to put the train of phenomena back on the rails, to restore the balance between antithetical forces. In fact, Brahman incarnates as the creation and every individual phenomenon in it. Incarnation is also understood as timely help delivered to a helpless creature. Swami Vivekananda explains incarnation as the response of Brahman to the helpless cry of humanity for direction and solace. Incarnations are many according to the Bhagavata, taking the idea beyond the ten Vaishnava incarnations. A fresh idea, a new solution, a discovery, a bouquet of flowers in a cold, cloudy day, a word of comfort for the sick—all these can be considered incarnations. Jesus was an incarnation, so was Judas, so was Peter, Mohammed, Moses, so too is the Sinai Mountain and the Burning bush.

Advaita advocates image worship as an effective mode of expanding awareness from the particular, *vishesha*, to the general *avishesha*, and to the subtle, *linga*, and then to the all-inclusive transcendent Brahman. Images are visual descriptions of Brahman. Shiva dancing is a circle of fire, Vishnu reclining on the serpent bed, Sri Krishna playing on flute amidst gopis in Vrindavan, Durga astride a lion slaying the buffalo demon, Hanuman flying with the mountain peak, Ganesha riding the mouse, Jesus on the cross, the black stone of Kaaba—all these are visual images describing the all-inclusive Brahman.

Jesus on the cross is incarnate Brahman, and the resurrected Christ transcendent Brahman. As the meditation deepens the interpretation changes and experience envelops larger spheres. The *vishvarupa*, cosmic form, of the Gita depicts the highest form of image worship. Experiencing everything as a connected network, seeing nothing redundant, respecting even a blade of grass, flowing with the ebb and tide of events, is *vistharupa darshana*, the vision of the cosmic form. This state of mind can be equated with the Buddhist *shunyata* and equanimity. Seeing all contradictions and paradoxes in one canvas is emptiness—into that emptiness flows the bliss of Brahman.

Acharya Shankara cleans up the mess of Hindu altar by prescribing six deities, *shanmata*, for daily worship and contemplation. They are: Shiva, Shakti, Vishnu, Kartikeya, Ganesha, and Surya. The living tradition of Advaita would add Christian God, Jewish Yahweh, and Islamic Allah into the pantheon of sacred deities. Jesus, Moses, and Muhammad would be accepted as gurus on a par with Vyasa, Acharya Shankara, Sri Krishna and Sri Ramachandra. The seeker can choose to worship all of them or any one of them or any combination of them. Acharya Shankara himself had composed hymns of invocation and designed methods of worship for these deities.

These Hindu deities are not just images. They are visual descriptions given by devotees who had spent years steeped in scriptures, engaged in discussions with scholars, lent loving service to the community, travelled the length and breadth of the land, deepened their sensitivities in meditation, and then crystallised and expressed their experiences in the most sublime language. Images are far superior to verbal descriptions and ritualistic worship is much deeper and integrative than precepts and preaching. A temple of worship is much more vivid than a book of knowledge. However, in Advaita, the ultimate temple is the

human body, the sanctum is the mind, the idol is the self, and the ideal is Brahman.

Acharya Shankara's pluralism project, that is, Advaita, which has been successfully implemented in India, can now be taken to the world at large to integrate all traditions under one umbrella, which is the true meaning of religion and dharma—deepening and binding together.

Has the Advaita vision of 'inclusive oneness' caused the downfall of Hinduism and India? Has Advaita outlived its value? Or is it that Advaita may be effective within dharmic traditions, but devoid of the intellectual and emotional tools, historically honed strategies, and community will, Advaita is pathetically impotent in dealing with exclusivist and aggressive, proselytising and predatory religious movements? Especially with Semitic traditions like Islam and Christianity whose marching slogan is 'faith, faith, more faith, and unquestioned faith'. The total abandonment of reason, 'dehellenization of Christianity', as Pope Emeritus Benedict XIV put it,<sup>22</sup> by the virulent followers and foot soldiers of these two religions have not only caused untold misery to humankind—crusades, thirty years' war, inquisitions, witch burnings, genocides, terrorism, veils, fatwas, forced conversions, colonisation, and so on—but also has shaken and fractured the world views and convictions of dharma communities and traditions. Hindu thinkers are increasingly calling into question the very morality of an asymmetrical engagement and the survival value of Advaita inclusiveness.

No doubt the world has moved away from the tooth and claw, a tooth for a tooth law of the jungle. In the twenty-first century, of a networked, connected and globalised planet of seven billion people, the whole world has become one neighbourhood and one family, *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*.<sup>23</sup> Though the world has not gotten rid of their racial, religious, linguistic, ethnic, and class

differences and disputes, the awareness of shared destiny and collective responsibility is slowly imbuing the text of human discourses. A strong feeling is emerging that the planet and its resources, human history and its accomplishments—religious, cultural, scientific, and technological—belong to all of humanity and that war, and its aftermath, a nuclear Armageddon, is no option for settling disputes, and that now is the time for a new religiosity, a new spirituality, a new philosophy, that captures the heartbeat of the age, that speaks the language of reconciliation, discussion, negotiation, win-win solutions, and the rest of it.

If two-thirds of the world comprises normative believers of different formal religions, one-third is made up of non-believers—atheists, agnostics, doubters, sceptics, secularists, communists, evolutionary biologists, cognitive scientists, and other neutral people. Even among the believers one-third is indifferent to dogmas and rituals. There are a large number of people who shop for spirituality and choose to make their own cocktail of beliefs and practices.

Orthodoxy's lock on the Koran, the Gita, the Bible, and other scriptures are loosening as the bandwidth of the access to information is widening. The dharmic traditions and Advaita are making slow but steady inroads into the hearths and habitats, boardrooms and drawing rooms, and sanctuaries and study centres of the world. The inclusive transcendence of Advaita, a meta-space for competing world views and truth claims to cohabit, alone can make meaning out of this incredibly chaotic diversity and offer a nonviolent framework for conversations and negotiations for positive sum solutions. Advaita is the only candidate for the religious stewardship of the world—to deepen in awareness and bind in love this tiny living planet, precariously poised on the edge of abyss.

Morality is the steadfastness of good in

overcoming evil without getting infected by the easy dubious ways of the antagonist. A victory sacrificing principles, dharma, is worse than defeat and will be unsustainable, *adharma*. Advaita has sufficient spiritual depth, intellectual clarity, emotional purity, ethical objectivity, interpretive skills, and strategic span to engage exclusivist and expansionist, selfish and virulent non-verifiable truth claims. Rationality and scientific thinking would be effective tools in this dialogue, appealing to the common issues facing humanity would be another, but the most effective would be patient silent work and exemplary living.

The asymmetry of an inclusive vision like Advaita interacting with an exclusive tradition like Christianity would look absurd, comical, and often suicidal. With one of the combatant's hand tied behind and the other free and fully armed.

The Advaita position could be:

1. Exclusivists hold certain truth claims for the defence of which they are willing to kill and be killed and for the realisation of which they are ready to subject themselves to severe discipline and make personal sacrifices.

2. Inclusivists hold certain other truth claims to defend which they are willing to sacrifice their lives and to validate which they are ready to engage in rational and non-violent arguments and follow a regime of personal disciplines.

3. Inclusivists base their defence arguments on collective human wisdom, shruti, reason, *yukti*, and experience born of practice, *anubhava*.

4. Whereas, exclusivists base their defence arguments purely on faith and a particular text.

These are the two basic orientations of the human psyche, exclusive and inclusive, in-group and out-group, us and they, I and thou, and faith and reason. And individuals and communities go through this pendulum swing, between faith and reason, often frighteningly schizophrenic, to find their equilibrium states. Both communities,


the faithfuls and the rationalists, have produced extraordinary human beings—brave, compassionate, skilful and creative. To cite a few: Albert Schweitzer and Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell.

Humanism, an ethical system based on collective human experiences and secularism, a political order based on human reason, both outcomes of the enlightenment project, aimed at the worldly good of human beings, along with pluralism or multiculturalism and environmentalism, come close to the Advaita vision of oneness. They represent the modern interpretation of dharma. Brahman manifests in time-space as dharma. The modern Indian state should adopt this definition of dharma rather than the outmoded *varnashrama* classification of people and professions based on the accident of birth. Competitive worth and not predetermined birth should be the criterion for organising society. Hinduism, being a moksha shastra, should break out of the narrow geographical confines and spread its wings to span the whole world. The new mantra should be: ‘Secularise the Indian state and globalise Hindu Dharma.’

The monolithic Christianity and Islam will be cannibalised by decentralised smaller faith groups. Advaita visualises a diffused power structure with decision making-centres everywhere. As V S Naipaul put it in the Indian context, a space for ‘million mutinies.’<sup>24</sup> A postmodernist, post-secular, post-hegemonic world is the world of Advaita—a world where all are engaged in friendly rivalry. ‘*Tairayam na virudhyate*; this [Advaita] view has no conflict with them.’<sup>25</sup> Advaita creatively engages with all truth claims and world narratives, declared Acharya Gaudapada, the grand guru of Acharya Shankara.

To conclude, Advaita doesn’t consider exclusive truth claims an aberration or threat to human survival or a hindrance to individual

flourish and wellbeing. The faith-based claims represent the right side of the brain and a person’s need for certainty and freedom from anxiety. Reason-based claims represent the left side of the brain and a person’s ability to think logically, see both sides of the coin, doubt a proposition, and last but not the least, one’s need for self-possession and freedom from dogma.

Between these two poles hangs human destiny. And the future of India and Hinduism could not be any different. 

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# ***The Flawed Dichotomy of Durga-Mahishasura: An Advaitic Postscript***

**Deepshikha Shahi**

**S**WAMI VIVEKANANDA said: 'Even if our every attempt is a failure, and we bleed and are torn asunder, yet, through all this, we have to preserve our heart—we must assert our Godhead in the midst of all these difficulties.'<sup>1</sup> In contemporary Indian political discourse, the mythological dichotomy of Durga-Mahishasura has been misleadingly enacted for fanning various fiery polarities: nationalist or anti-nationalist, rightist or leftist, brahmana or Dalit, and goddess or sex-worker.

While this divisive political discourse carves the imagery of goddess Durga as Bharata Mata to epitomise a specific kind of nationalism promoted by those Indian rightists who glorify divine femininity supported by a brahmanical mindset, it inadvertently stimulates an antagonistic allegory of Mahishasura, a mythical demon slayed by goddess Durga and also customarily idol-worshipped by a few Dalit and tribal communities in different corners of India, to portray the so-called 'anti-nationalists' who either refute the rightist vision of nationalism, including Indian leftists, or reject the depiction of sex-workers as demonised femininity, including several feminists.

A further complication arises when the normative authority of the same ancient Indian scriptures is speciously evoked for both justifying

and condemning this divisive political discourse: the same scriptures are eulogised by those who morally justify this discourse and doomed by those who ethically condemn it. Alternatively, this article proposes that a discursive cycle based on eulogising or dooming of scriptures is likely to 'sustain' rather than dilute political polarities. In fact, the ability of this divisive political discourse to practically deepen polarities is strategically rooted in a flawed exposition of ancient Indian scriptures.

This article, therefore, sets out to systematically explain the philosophical distortions inherent in the dichotomous representation of Durga and Mahishasura. In order to do this, the article awakens the ancient Indian philosophy of Advaita, literally meaning non-dual, as an explanatory framework. Since Advaita has been widely recognised as the philosophical base of Durga-Mahishasura episode of the *Markandeya Purana*, and as Advaita ties the diverse polarities of phenomenal reality together with a world marked with a single hidden connectedness or Brahman, it can offer a tactically apt vantage point for critically appraising the hazards of this discordant political discourse.

This article is divided into three sections. The first section explicates the discursive journey of the Durga-Mahishasura dichotomy from ancient Indian scriptures to contemporary parliamentary debates. The second section begins with foregrounding Advaita as the philosophical

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base of the *Markandeya Purana*, the ancient Indian scripture which contains the Durga-Mahishasura episode. It then sets out to explain how the divisive political discourse, which is strictly based on the mythological reading of Durga-Mahishasura dichotomy and is ignorant of its Advaitic philosophical base, misapprehends ideological, gender, and caste identities by rigidifying their otherwise fluid forms. Finally, the third section mobilises the Advaitic philosophical base of Durga-Mahishasura dichotomy to re-interpret the political problems emanating from divided identities. This article concludes that the idea of transcending identities, that underpins the philosophy of Advaita, is a strategically effective presumption to overcome the dangers of a divisive political discourse.

### **Durga as the Slayer of Mahishasura: The Discursive Journey from Scriptures to Parliament**

According to the ancient Indian scripture *Markandeya Purana*, a demon called Mahishasura was born out of the union of Rambha, the king of demons or asuras and a she-buffalo, Mahishi. Mahishasura, who was half man and half buffalo, earned a boon from Lord Shiva—it is Lord Brahma or the God Agni in some versions—after a prolonged penance. According to this boon, Mahishasura could be slayed by nobody but a woman. Mahishasura was very pleased with this boon as he anticipated a woman to be too fragile to defeat his mighty self. The arrogant Mahishasura hurled a reign of terror over the universe and wreaked havoc in the abode of gods, the divine beings, *devas*, or *suras*.

After their humiliation at the hands of Mahishasura, the gods took refuge under Lord Brahma, who then took them to Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva. Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, the trinity embracing the combined energy of



Durga Killing Mahishasura

creation, preservation, and destruction characterising godhood, blazed forth all unalloyed power, *tejas*, which concentrated at one point to form Goddess Durga. Durga, as the culmination of all divine energies, undertook the appearance of a woman who possessed the ultimate power to fight and defeat Mahishasura.<sup>2</sup>

Durga waged a valiant battle against Mahishasura who fleetingly assumed the form of a buffalo, a lion, a man carrying sword, an elephant, and lastly a buffalo again. This battle—discussed in great detail in the third chapter of *Devi Mahatmya* or *Durga Saptashati*, a scripture composed by sage Markandeya around 250 CE, which comprises seven hundred verses spread across thirteen chapters in praise of



Durga—raged for thousands of years. Finally, Durga pinned down Mahishasura and chopped off his head. The gods, rid of the demon, showered Durga—the slayer of Mahishasura, Mahishasura-mardini—with immense applauses and prayed for her return every time they needed her. Durga disappeared with an assurance to reappear when called with devotion.

In fact, *Devi Mahatmya* is considered a later interpolation to the larger scripture, the *Markandeya Purana*. According to C D Collins, *Devi Mahatmya* was interposed in 550 CE into the *Markandeya Purana*, which originally came into existence in 250 CE.<sup>3</sup> The *Devi Mahatmya* was translated by Indologists into English in 1823, followed by an analysis with excerpts in French in 1824. It was translated into Latin in 1831 and Greek in 1853.<sup>4</sup>

From a historical-sociological perspective, the ritual chanting of the verses or slokas of the *Devi Mahatmya* during the annually celebrated festival of Navaratri, nine nights dedicated to the worship of the nine forms of Durga, has kept this scripture alive in the Indian socio-cultural milieu. However, this scripture remains denounced by a few Dalit and tribal communities who cast off the intellectual legacy of *Devi Mahatmya* as a 'brahmanical conspiracy' to lock up Dalit minds in a 'caste prison'.

As a reaction against this brahmanical conspiracy, the Dalit reinterpretation of the Durga-Mahishasura tussle endeavours to establish the demons such as Mahishasura as those honoured ancestors of Dalits who fought against the brahmanical onslaughts. Those who claim ancestry from Mahishasura, for instance, the Asur tribe of Jharkhand and the Santhals of Bengal, do not annually celebrate but mourn the slaying of Mahishasura by Durga.

While both the traditions of celebrating and mourning the killing of Mahishasura by Durga

have remained an integral part of the Indian national life, the rightist parliamentary debates around the dichotomous representation of Durga-Mahishasura disparagingly branded the worshippers of Durga as 'nationalist' and the critics of Durga, read the worshippers of Mahishasura, as 'anti-nationalist'.<sup>5</sup> These debates also revolved around an erroneous reference to Durga as a 'sex worker',<sup>6</sup> thereby mistakably counteposing the nationalistic credentials of the sympathisers of divine-femininity, as embodied by Durga, and demonised femininity, as exemplified by sex-workers.

Though the leftist political opposition to the controversial rightist debates in parliament was guided by the goal of defending a broader all-encompassing notion of nationalism, the very entry of the Durga-Mahishasura controversy in parliamentary debates parenthetically triggered various political polarities, namely, rightist-leftist, brahmana-Dalit, and goddess-sex-worker. While these political polarities rigidify specific identities—by setting the particular identities of rightists, brahmanas, and divine femininities as polar opposite to that of leftists, Dalits, and demonised femininities—they tend to ignore a pertinent question. Is this polar portrayal of political identities, based on the mythological reading of Durga-Mahishasura episode, philosophically sustainable? The next section intends to investigate this unexplored question.

### ***Durga-Mahishasura Dichotomy: A Philosophical Battle of Identities?***

Is the dichotomous representation of the respective identities of Durga and Mahishasura supported by the philosophical tenets of its containing scripture *Devi Mahatmya* or *Markandeya Purana*? In order to appropriately answer this central question, one needs to investigate the following related questions. What is the

philosophy of the *Devi Mahatmya*, as mentioned in the *Markandeya Purana*? Is the *Markandeya Purana*, as the containing scripture of the *Devi Mahatmya*, related to the philosophy of pre- and post-Acharya Shankara Advaita? How should one philosophically comprehend the identities of Durga and Mahishasura?

### **The Philosophy of Markandeya Purana: Foregrounding Advaita**

While the dichotomous demonstration of Durga and Mahishasura solely borrows from the mythological content of the *Markandeya Purana*, it totally ignores the philosophical undercurrent of this scripture. Nevertheless, the mythological content of a scripture cannot make complete sense in disjunction with its philosophical covering. Drawing attention toward the critical importance of decoding the philosophical outlook of mythology, Kathryn A Morgan observes: '[The] non-philosophical myth is a story about truth that is often pernicious and misleading. The myth they incorporate serves their own ends. These ends are: the reformulation of people's ideas about literary and cultural authority, [and] the problematisation of the different modes of linguistic representation.'<sup>7</sup>

It is therefore essential to unearth the philosophical underpinning of the *Markandeya Purana* to prevent the possibility of its pernicious and misleading interpretations, which in turn might manipulate people's ideas for serving vested political interests. So, what is the philosophy of the *Markandeya Purana*? The philosophical geneses of the *Markandeya Purana* have been traced in Advaita.<sup>8</sup> As such, Advaita is internal to *Markandeya Purana*. While M T Sahasrabudhe classifies *Makarandeya Purana* as one of the significant heralds in the philosophical heirloom of pre-Shankara Advaita, Eliot Deutsch pays homage to Shankara in the second

line of his commentary on *Devi Mahatmya* as incorporated in *Markandeya Purana*.<sup>9</sup>

Sita Anantha Raman explains how *Saundaryalahiri*, a Sanskrit hymn developed as a meditative tool by Acharya Shankara, was expanded by later monks to meditate between Advaita intellectuals and lay tantric devotees of Durga.<sup>10</sup> Antonio Rigopoulos establishes *Markandeya Purana* as a scripture advocating a specific process of knowledge acquisition, jnana yoga, which is essentially situated on the non-dual framework of Advaita,<sup>11</sup> whereas Tracy Pintchman explicitly asserts the birth of Goddess Durga in *Devi Mahatmya* as 'Advaitic'.<sup>12</sup>

### **Pre- and Post-Shankara Advaita: The Identity of the Self**

If the birth of Goddess Durga in *Devi Mahatmya* is Advaitic, then what are the philosophical propositions of Advaita? John Grimes explains that the philosophy of Advaita is divided into different positions by many scholars—pre-Shankara, Shankara, and post-Shankara.<sup>13</sup> However, the subtle differences in these positions—which might have arisen in the course of the clarification of a particular point of view, in the elucidation of an issue, in the process of responding to an objection, and so on—are only exegetical and not doctrinal. Thus, such differences are not irreconcilable within the framework of Advaita, nor do they make different positions of Advaita—pre-Shankara, Shankara and post-Shankara—a house divided against itself. These differences are essentially similar in terms of the common goal of realising one's inward self.

The philosophy of Advaita, which is directed towards the goal of realising one's inward self, presents a threefold classification of the 'self' that depends on three construals of consciousness: (i) Jiva, the individuated self, which has its own parameters of reflexive occurrence, given by the body

and its apparatus; (ii) Atman, the auto-reflexive self, whose auto-reflexivity is occurrent; and (iii) Brahman, the all-encompassing self, which is typically reflexive and constitutes the non-dual, irreducible, and universal consciousness.

The Advaitic outlook of the *Markandeya Purana* articulates the process of knowledge-acquisition, jnana yoga, as advancement from highly individuated personal and subjective states of consciousness, to general features across subjects, to the non-dual universal consciousness. As such, the individuated identities—comprised of jiva, the bodily self and Atman, the auto-reflexive self—constitute diverse external expressions of Brahman, the all-encompassing self, possessing a single core identity. The gradual realisation of this single core identity or Brahman necessitates persistent disassociation from the specific identities of individuated selves.<sup>14</sup>

As such Advaita, as the philosophical underpinning of the *Markandeya Purana*, declares that the only identity that exists at the core of the Being is Brahman: that is, a 'single hidden connectedness' beneath the experienced objective and subjective diversities of identities across the world.<sup>15</sup> This does not mean that the world, with its compatible or incompatible diverse selves, ceases to exist, but that the identities of these diverse selves have a lower perceived level of 'ambiguous reality', partial and distorted reality, that exists with Brahman, the ultimate core reality, at its root.<sup>16</sup>

Only a determined detachment from the separated identities of individuated selves could possibly create room for the realisation of the single hidden connected core identity or Brahman. If the Advaitic philosophical base of the *Markandeya Purana* advocates a steady detachment from separated identities of diverse selves for a subsequent realisation of a single hidden connected core identity, then how is it logically

plausible to rigidly postulate Durga and Mahishasura as two dichotomous identities?

### ***Durga and Mahishasura: The Perennial Bearers of Multiple Fluid Self-Identities***

How should one comprehend the identities of Durga and Mahishasura? In this context, it is crucial to bear in mind that the mythological narratives spread across the thirteen chapters of *Devi Mahatmya* in *Markandeya Purana* deal with a complex tussle between various forms of divine and demonic forces as ultimately steered by Durga and Mahishasura. While the divine transiently attains the appearances of Chandika, Ambika, Kaushiki, Parvati, Kalika, Kali, Maheshvari, Bhadrakali, and so on, the demon ephemerally acquires the presences of Chanda, Munda, Shumbha, Nishumbha, Dhumralochan, Chamunda, Raktabija, Madhu, Kaitabha, Chikura, and so on. What do these multiple mythological forms of divine and demonic forces indicate? And how should one perceive the nature of their mythological tussle?

Commenting on the nature of mythology in *Devi Mahatmya*, Satya Prakash Choudhary explains:

Myth is a very effective ancient way of teaching. What cannot be conveyed through philosophical discussions and logical debates can be transmitted more easily through myth and metaphor. Sacred myth speaks to us in multiple ways both rational and non-rational. Thus at one level *Devi mahatmyam* [non-rationally] chronicles the battle between the *Devi* [divine] and the *asuras* [demons]. At another level it [rationally] deals with the *battle of life*. ... deals with the inner battle between the divine and the demoniac forces within the human psyche, between the positive and negative [psychic impulses rooted in human nature]. The battlegrounds represent our own human consciousness, and its events symbolize our own

experiences. ... clashes with the demons symbolize the outward and inward struggles we face daily. The Devi [Durga], personified simultaneously as the one supreme Goddess and also the many goddesses, confronts the demons of ahamkara or ego (our mistaken notion of who we are or what we identify ourselves with), of excessive *ramas* and *rajas*,<sup>17</sup> that in turn give birth to other demons of excessive craving, greed, anger and pride, and of incessant *citta vrttis* (compulsive inner thought processes springing from past karmic residue). In the ultimate sense the dichotomy between the bad and the good is also a false one. There is no duality. Both are part of single paradoxical reality [the Advaitic single core identity or Brahman]. The text [*Devi Mahatmya*] drives home this truth so beautifully.<sup>18</sup>

If Durga and Mahishasura essentially uphold fluid self-identities that express momentary psychological makeup of a certain level of human consciousness and eventually get submerged into the single core identity or Brahman, then is it rationally viable or ethically justifiable to recall the Durga-Mahishasura dichotomy for outlining mutually antagonistic political identities? Clearly, the philosophical misreading of the Durga-Mahishasura episode of the *Markandeya Purana* has inappropriately distorted this scripture to foster politically antagonistic alignment of ideological, gender, and caste identities. An Advaitic reinterpretation of the Durga-Mahishasura dichotomy in the following section opens up pathways for surpassing this problematic antagonistic alignment of identities.

### **Advaita and the Transcending of Identities: A Strategic Way Forward**

The Advaitic reinterpretation of the Durga-Mahishasura dichotomy finds expression in the writings of Ramchandra Gandhi, who comments: 'Who is Mahishasura? Instructively portrayed in sacred art in exaggerated contours of

sexuality, Mahishasura represents the arrogance of ego, the narcissism of form, the separatism of *I* against *you*, *this* opposed to *that*, the falsehood of exclusivism.'<sup>19</sup>

Ramchandra Gandhi completes his narrative by arguing that Durga finally acquires a non-dual identity, comparable to the Advaitic single core identity, of *ardhanarishvara*, literally meaning a non-dual composition of half woman and half man. As such, this non-dual identity of *ardhanarishvara* implies a total dissolution of the apparently irreconcilable traits of masculine and feminine identities. In fact, the symbol of *ardhanarishvara* characterises the inseparability of male and female principles, thereby advocating a composite form that asserts the 'unity of opposites,' *coniunctio oppositorum*.<sup>20</sup>

The *ardhanarishvara*, as a universal reality, marks an integration of *purusha*, the male half, with *prakriti*, the female half, wherein *purusha* denotes the male passive force of the universe, while *prakriti* indicates the female active force of the universe, both the male and female forces are constantly drawn to embrace and merge with each other. In fact, the *purusha-prakriti* union, though separated by the intervening axis, generates this universe. This idea is also manifested in the union of the *linga* of Shiva and the *yonis* of Devi creating the cosmos.<sup>21</sup>

As such, *ardhanarishvara* signifies 'totality that lies beyond duality', 'bi-unity of male and female', and 'the non-duality of the Being',<sup>22</sup> thereby fusing the dichotomies of universe: male and female, aloof and active, fearsome and gentle, destructive and constructive, and so on.<sup>23</sup> This line of argumentation could be further stretched to assert that the dissolution of dualism in *ardhanarishvara* makes it unnecessary for diverse political identities to be philosophically looking at each other as two or more oppositional entities. In fact, both Durga

and Mahishasura philosophically uphold ever-transient identities, at the levels of origination and appearance, which ultimately melt down in oneness by dropping all mutually clashing dualist attributes.

However, the Advaitic philosophical presumption of melting down of diverse identities in oneness must not be evoked as a political license to forcefully homogenise India's cultural diversity in the name of nationalism. In fact, the whole rightist political agenda of establishing the Advaitic philosopher Acharya Shankara as the national philosopher, as well as the ideological opposition of such an agenda compulsorily generate dangerously divisive political discourses.<sup>24</sup> Though these divisive political discourses claim to be informed by the central tenets of Advaita, they essentially thrive upon a thorough misreading of this philosophy.

As Advaita essentially advocates the acceptance of diversity in forms—in terms of multiplicity of religion-, caste-, and gender-based identities—in the phenomenal world, and makes a philosophical appeal to develop an insight or a consciousness to approach and then realise these diverse identities as multiple phenomenal manifestations of the single hidden connected core reality, it cannot be meaningfully or convincingly (mis)appropriated either as a justificatory tool to threaten or homogenise diverse identities, or as a despicable instrument to condemn such threatening or homogenising political tendencies.

The basic motive behind foregrounding the philosophy of Advaita, as lying underneath the Durga-Mahishasura dichotomy, is to primarily suggest that the seemingly dichotomous identities are capable of being transcended at the empirical level. It has been established by a wide range of Advaita scholars that the multiplicity of dichotomous identities, as they become

understandable through qualified *vijnana*, are capable of being diluted and unified, through unqualified *vijnana*. Both qualified *vijnana*, the method that facilitates knowledge of diverse dichotomous selves and unqualified *vijnana*, the method that facilitates knowledge of single core self, are empirical.

As such, the transcendence of identities in Advaita is claimed to be an experiential reality. In this context, it is significant to uphold that even if the Indian political rightists, as believers of Hindutva or Dalits, as critics of the brahmanical mindset, personally refute the empirical reality of transcending dichotomous identities, the philosophy of Advaita at least gives an alternative epistemological starting point to constructively approach the issues of clash between dichotomous selves. This alternative epistemological starting point can dismantle or at least disrupt the subterfuges, that is, aggressive political outcomes, emanating from the rigid dichotomous interpretations of Durga-Mahishasura dichotomy.


The acknowledgement towards the reality of multiplicity of identities in the phenomenal world is echoed by Acharya Shankara who states: 'Prior to the realization of Brahma [sic] as the Self of all, all transactions (of the phenomenal world) for the time being are real enough ... As long as the truth of the one-ness of the Self is not realized, the knowledge that all these [multiple] effects ... the thing[s] to be known, are unreal, does not arise.'<sup>25</sup> Deutsch pines that it is absolutely essential to strongly emphasize this Advaitic acceptance of the multiple experiences of phenomenal reality because the philosophy of Advaita has so often been misrepresented as the one that simply condemns the world—with its multiplicity of experiences and identities—as unreal.<sup>26</sup> So long as the oneness of multiple identities remains unrealised in the phenomenal

world, the politicised attempts to homogenise identities in the name of nationalism are essentially contradictory to the philosophy of Advaita that underpins the Durga-Mahishasura episode of the *Markandeya Purana*.

### Concluding Remarks

The unbending, deterministic, and dogmatic identification of Durga with right-wing nationalism or brahmanical divine femininities,<sup>27</sup> and a reactionary counter-identification of Mahishasura with left-wing nationalism,<sup>28</sup> or Dalit nationalism,<sup>29</sup> or demonised femininities<sup>30</sup> are both rationally and ethically hollow! It is crucial to acknowledge that the provocation of political polarities via philosophically flawed discourses on the Durga-Mahishasura dichotomy rides on this rational and ethical hollowness. Against these intellectually irrational and politically hazardous discourses, a prudently premeditated endorsement of the Advaitic notion of transcending identities can potentially emerge as a strategic way forward.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, *ardhanarishvara* is a powerful symbol of formless nationalism, which remains incuriously and therefore disturbingly contested by diverse ideological, gender, caste, and religious identities in today's India.

From a theoretical perspective, the approaches to identities have got much to learn from those political moments when the flawed dichotomous awakening of mythological gods or goddesses is done for the strategic purpose of gaining occasional support for vested interests. As the flawed dichotomous awakening and oppositional interpretations of political identities via mythological episodes, typically involving tussles between gods, goddesses, demons, and so on could serve the vested political interests in the short-run, a systematic scholarly attempt to expose the philosophical deceits inherent in such acts could not only assist in preventing the

bloody carnages that eventually get legitimised in the name of gods or goddesses in the long-run, but also encourage an alternative theoretical move toward utilising conceptual categories like *ardhanarishava* for reconciling the habitual polarities that are deeply ingrained in present-day political identities. 

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  8. See Eliot Deutsch, *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1969); *Seeking Mahādevī: Constructing the Identities of the Hindu Great Goddess*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (New York: State University of New York, 2001); Sita Anantha Raman, *Women in India: A Social and Cultural History—Volume 1* (Oxford: Praeger, 2009); Antonio Rigopoulos, *Dattātreya: The Immortal Guru, Yogin, and Avatāra: A Study of the Transformative and Inclusive Character of a Multifaceted Hindu Deity* (New York: State University of New York, 1998); and M T Sahasrabudhe, *A Survey of the Pre-Sankara Advaita Vedanta* (Poona: University of Poona, 1968).
  9. See *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction*, 128. For a detailed discussion on the specific contribution of Acharya Shankara to Advaita philosophy, see T M P Mahadevan, *Shankara* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1968); *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction*; and Karl H Potter, *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies*, 25 vols (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2019), Volume 3. For an understanding of the history of Advaita in Indian philosophy, see S Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, 2 vols (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1940) and Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, 5 vols (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991).
  10. See *Women in India: A Social and Cultural History*, 145.
  11. See *Dattātreya: The Immortal Guru*.
  12. *Seeking Mahādevī*, 9.
  13. See John Grimes, *Problems and Perspectives in Religious Discourse: Advaita Vedānta Implications* (New York: State University of New York, 1994).
  14. See *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Volume 3.
  15. See Deepshikha Shahi and Gennaro Ascione, 'Rethinking the Absence of Post-Western International Relations Theory in India: 'Advaitic Monism' as an Alternative Epistemological Resource', *European Journal of International Relations*, 22/2 (June 2016), 313–34.
  16. See Richard Brooks, 'The Meaning of "Real" in Advaita Vedānta', *Philosophy East and West*, 19/4 (October 1969), 385–98.
  17. The Indian philosophy of Sankhya is founded on the theory of transformation of the unmanifest primal nature, prakriti, into the manifest phenomenal world. This is a transformation from the most undifferentiated to the most differentiated state of existence; it may be called an evolutionary process. This process is made possible by the three attributes or gunas of prakriti, namely sattva, being-ness; rajas, change; and tamas, resistance. For an elaborate discussion on the three gunas, see K B Ramakrishna Rao, 'The Gunas of Prakṛti According to the Sāṃkhya Philosophy', *Philosophy East and West*, 13/1 (April 1963), 61–71.
  18. Dr Satya Prakash Choudhary, 'The Glory of the Goddess-Devi Mahatmyam', 4–5 <[http://www.vedicastrologer.org/mantras/chandi/chandi\\_inner\\_meaning.pdf](http://www.vedicastrologer.org/mantras/chandi/chandi_inner_meaning.pdf)> accessed 30 November 2019. Emphasis added.
  19. Ramchandra Gandhi, 'The Adoration of Form and Formlessness', *India International Centre Quarterly*, 13/1 (March 1986), 130–8; 134.
  20. See *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*.
  21. See Alain Daniélou, *The Myths and Gods of India: The Classic Work on Hindu Polytheism* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1985).
  22. Randy P Conner, David Hatfield Sparks, and Mariya Sparks, 'Ardhararishvara', *Cassell's Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol, and Spirit*, (London: Cassell, 1997), 67.
  23. In Indian history, the earliest *ardhanarishvara* images belong to the Kushan period, starting from the first century CE. Its iconography evolved and was perfected in the Gupta era, beginning from 318–9 CE. The Puranas and various iconographic treatises mention the mythology and iconography of *ardhanarishvara*. Though *ardhanarishvara* is visible as a popular iconographic form in many Shiva temples throughout India, very few temples are dedicated to the deity. As a philosophical concept, *ardhanarishvara* represents the synthesis of masculine and feminine energies of the universe, namely purusha and prakriti. It illustrates how Shakti, the female principle of universe,

is inseparable from, or the same as, according to some interpretations, Shiva, the male principle of universe. The union of these principles is exalted as the root and womb of all creation. While Shiva's, male, rosary in the *ardhanarishvara* iconography aligns him with asceticism and spirituality, Shakti's, female, mirror associates her to the material illusory world. (See Doris Meth, *Many Heads, Arms, and Eyes: Origin, Meaning, and Form of Multiplicity in Indian Art* (Leiden: Brill, 1997)). As such, the *ardhanarishvara* iconography, as a combination of Shiva and Shakti, conveys that Shiva and Shakti are seemingly distinct yet interdependent and interconnected. This interpretation has also been reinforced by the inscriptions found along with *ardhanarishvara* images in Java and the eastern Malay Archipelago. (See *Encyclopaedia of the Hindu World*, ed. Ganga Ram Garg, 3 vols (New Delhi: Concept, 1992), Volume 3). The *Vishnudharmottara Purana* too emphasises the identity and sameness of the male purusha and female prakriti, manifested in the image of *ardhanarishvara*.

24. See Kuldeep Kumar, 'The Philosophy of Dualism', *The Hindu*, 10 June 2016 <<http://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/The-philosophy-of-dualism/article14414713.ece>> accessed 30 November 2019.
25. Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*, 2.1.14. Translation from *Brahma-Sūtra Shāṅkara-Bhāṣya*, trans. Vasudeo Mahadeo Apte (Bombay: Popular, 1960), 306.
26. Deutsch explains the Advaitic position by stating that every datum of experience of multiplicity within appearance is existent and not unreal, according to the Advaitin, so far as it is a datum of experience, that is, as it is a concrete fact of our experience. It nevertheless lacks full reality because it is subratable. According to Acharya Shankara, knowledge can be divided into two types: empirical and trans-empirical. His metaphysics start with *saguna* Brahman, reality marked with empirical pluralism, to terminate at *nirguna* Brahman, reality realised as epistemological monism. Acharya Shankara clearly admits the difference between *saguna* Brahman and *nirguna* Brahman, thereby reflecting the dissimilarity that exists between knowledge and ignorance. He presents this

distinction in terms of two perspectives: absolute and relative, *vidya* and *avidya* or *paramarthika* and *vyavaharika*, respectively. For Acharya Shankara, pluralism is only provisional and thus, it is not possible to say that Advaita is a philosophy centred on these two seemingly oppositional perspectives. For a detailed discussion on the hierarchy of knowledge of multiple or dual and single experiences of reality in Advaita, see *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction*.

27. See Anja Kovacs, 'You Don't Understand, We Are at War! Refashioning Durga in the Service of Hindu Nationalism', *Contemporary South Asia*, 13/4 (December 2004), 373–88 and Sanjay Basak, 'BJP Will Try to Exploit Row over Durga in Bengal Polls', *Deccan Chronicle*, 29 February 2016 <<http://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/290216/west-bengal-bjp-to-use-nationalism.html>> accessed 30 November 2019.
28. See Kundan Singh, 'Opposing the Left is Not "Right"-Part II: More to Mahishasura', *Indiafacts: Truth Be Told*, 4 March 2016 <<http://indiafacts.org/opposing-the-left-is-not-right-part-ii-more-to-mahishasura/>> accessed 30 November 2019.
29. See Abhinav Prakash Singh, 'Examining the Mahishasura Martyrdom Day and Dalit-Bahujan History', *Swarajya*, 22 October 2013 <<https://swarajyamag.com/longform/examining-the-mahishasura-martyrdom-day-and-dalit-bahujan-history-writing>> accessed 30 November 2019 and Braj Ranjan Mani, 'Dalit-Bahujan Perspective on the Mahishasura Debate', *Countercurrents*, 2 March 2016 <<http://www.countercurrents.org/manio20316.htm>> accessed 30 November 2019.
30. Nivedita Menon, 'Searching for Raja Debi—A Santhal Poet Tells the Tale of Mahishasura', *Kafila*, 27 February 2016 <<https://kafila.online/2016/02/27/searching-for-raja-debi-a-santhal-poet-tells-the-tale-of-mahishasura/>> accessed 30 November 2019.
31. For an elaborate account of how Advaita offers an alternative understanding of individual and state-based identities in international politics, see Deepshikha Shahi, *Advaita as a Global International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge, 2018).



# Maya—A Conceptual History

Dr Arpita Mitra

AMONG THE MANY SCHOLARLY projects on Indian history and culture that Swami Vivekananda intended posterity to take up was a kind of history of Indian concepts.<sup>1</sup> Such a history would capture the changing meaning of concepts over time. In recent decades, intellectual history has emerged in a big way, especially in the US and Europe, partly out of a critique of the dominance of social history. While it is still new and highly contested there, intellectual history has received even scantier attention in the field of Indology. According to Sheldon Pollock: 'The field of Indology has long been dominated by the old philology, which one could characterize *grosso modo* and not necessarily pejoratively as history without ideas (the history of language or textual change, for example), and the old Orientalism, which can be viewed as ideas without history.'<sup>2</sup>

It is not that no history of concepts was ever written in Indology. Jan Gonda's work on concepts such as *ishvara*, *maya*, and so on, Prabhu Dutt Shastri's work on *maya*, or K L S Rao's *The Concept of Śraddhā* would bear witness to the contrary. However, it may not be wrong to say that conceptual history as a systematic and definite discipline with well-defined methods is yet to evolve in the field of Indic Studies.<sup>3</sup> Having pointed out the academic need to pay attention to the history of ancient Indian ideas,

the objective of this essay is rather modest: to present before the reader a brief historical sketch of the concept of 'maya' in Hinduism—a concept without which any discussion on Vedānta is incomplete.

## The Meaning of 'Maya'

'Maya' is undoubtedly a difficult concept. It has been commonly understood and translated as 'illusion'. It is true that one of the general meanings of the term is deception. However, the Vedāntic concept of 'maya' is a philosophically sophisticated concept, and the general perception of it meaning 'illusion' is wrong. Prabhu Dutt Shastri says: 'The world, says the Maya theory in its correct interpretation, is an *appearance*, not a *mere illusion*, since the latter as such is impossible.'<sup>4</sup> It is important to distinguish between the general usage of the term and the technical usage, both of which, however, seem to overlap at times. The term was not invented by the Vedānta philosophers. It pre-dates both Mahāyāna Buddhism, where it is used in a specific sense, and the later school of Advaita Vedānta. It is found in the earliest speculations of humankind recorded in the Rīg Veda, and appears early in the Upanishads in the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad*, while it crystallises into a specific meaning in the *Śvetāshvatara Upanishad*. It then develops into its final form at the hands of the Advaita Vedāntins.

It is worth citing here Swamiji's brief discussion of the history and meaning of the concept:

Generally it is used, though incorrectly, to denote illusion, or delusion, or some such thing.

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But the theory of Maya forms one of the pillars upon which the Vedānta rests; it is, therefore, necessary that it should be properly understood. I ask a little patience of you, for there is a great danger of its being misunderstood. The oldest idea of Maya that we find in Vedic literature is the sense of delusion; but then the real theory had not been reached. We find such passages as, 'Indra through his Maya assumed various forms'. Here it is true the word Maya means something like magic, and we find various other passages, always taking the same meaning. The word Maya then dropped out of sight altogether. But in the meantime the idea was developing. Later, the question was raised: 'Why can't we know this secret of the universe?' And the answer given was very significant: 'Because we talk in vain, and because we are satisfied with the things of the senses, and because we are running after desires; therefore, we, as it were, cover the Reality with a mist.' Here the word Maya is not used at all, but we get the idea that the cause of our ignorance is a kind of mist that has come between us and the Truth. Much later on, in one of the latest Upanishads, we find the word Maya reappearing, but this time, a transformation has taken place in it, and a mass of new meaning has attached itself to the word. Theories had been propounded and repeated, others had been taken up, until at last the idea of Maya became fixed. We read in the Shvetashvatara Upanishad, 'Know nature to be Maya and the Ruler of this Maya is the Lord Himself.' Coming to our philosophers, we find that this word Maya has been manipulated in various fashions, until we come to the great Shankaracharya. The theory of Maya was manipulated a little by the Buddhists too, but in the hands of the Buddhists it became very much like what is called Idealism, and that is the meaning that is now generally given to the word Maya. When the Hindu says the world is Maya, at once people get the idea that the world is an illusion. This interpretation has some basis, as coming through the Buddhistic philosophers, because there was one section of

philosophers who did not believe in the external world at all. But the Maya of the Vedānta, in its last developed form, is neither Idealism nor Realism, nor is it a theory. It is a simple statement of facts—what we are and what we see around us.<sup>5</sup>

Hopefully, we shall be in a better position to appreciate his statement at the end of the present essay.

There are certain dimensions associated with the word 'maya': power, inscrutable, mysterious, magical, deception, and pretense. All these connotations have endured over time and have been invoked in different contexts. Let us take a look at the etymology of the word.<sup>6</sup> Prabhu Dutt Shastri writes: 'The word 'Maya' is derived from  $\sqrt{mā}$ , to measure—"mīyate anayā iti", i.e., by which is measured, meaning thereby, as tradition has it, that illusive projection of the world by which the immeasurable Brahman appears as if measured. The same root gives further the sense of "to build", leading to the idea of "appearance" or illusion. Sāyaṇa, in his commentary on R.V. [Rig Veda] i. II. 7, too derives the word from "*mādd māne*" (i.e.,  $\sqrt{mā}$ , to measure).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore: 'Another way to derive it would be "*māti* (svātmānam) darśayati iti māyā", i.e., "that which shows itself—that which appears to our view (without having any real existence)". This will be from  $\sqrt{mā}$ , to show. Hence, the conception of māyā as the causal will power (icchā-śakti or prajñā) may be derived from  $\sqrt{mā}$ , to know; and, as the effectual state of the world as illusion, from  $\sqrt{mā}$ , to measure, to build, etc.' (30).

### Maya in the Vedas

The central debate about the concept of 'maya' in the Vedic texts is whether it means the same thing as what it came to mean when the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta was fully developed at the hands of Acharya Gaudapada and Acharya

Shankara. Opinions on this issue are divided. Simply put, some scholars differentiate strictly between the meaning of the concept as found in the Vedas and as found in later Vedantic philosophy, while others consider the meaning of the term in the Vedic and the later Vedantic contexts to be identical. According to Jan Gonda: 'Both views pronounced by many of our predecessors, viz. that according to which Vedism and Hinduism attached different values to the term *māyā*, and the "Vedantist theory" according to which the sense of "deceptive appearance, unreality, illusion, magic" is also to be attributed to the relevant passages of the earlier Indian literature, are equally inadequate.' However, 'this term while expressing fundamentally the same sense from the earliest texts to the later periods of Hinduism was in the course of time applied in different connections, used in various religious, philosophical and profane contexts, attributed to different owners, bearers or wielders, that its sense and range of application was deepened, extended and specialized.'<sup>8</sup> We shall be able to judge the issue for ourselves perhaps at the end of the essay. Let us first examine the usage of the term in the Vedas.

The word 'maya' appears in about seventy-five hymns in the Rig Veda in its simple and compound forms. In these hymns, twenty-four times, it occurs in the nominative and accusative form *mayah*. The other forms in which the word occurs are: *mayaya*, *mayinah*, *mayabhih*, *mayinam*, *maya*, *mayam*, *mayi*, *mayinam*, *mayini*, *mayina*, *mayavina*, *mayavan*, *mayavinam*, and *mayavinah*. Of the seventy-five hymns, thirty-five are addressed to Indra, eight to Agni, four to the Ashvins as well as the Maruts, three to Vishve-devah, two to Varuna, two to Soma, two to Mitra-Varuna, two to Dyava-Prithvi, and one each to Ushas, Sarasvati, the Adityas, Pushan, Atri, Jnanam, the Ribhus, Indra-Varuna,

Soma-Arka, Mayabheda, Indravishnu, Prajapati-Vaishvamitra, and Surya-Vaishvanara.<sup>9</sup>

The word does not occur so often in the Yajur and the Sama Vedas, which are basically an adaptation of many mantras of the Rig Veda along with the addition of some new mantras. The word occurs about twenty times, spread over sixteen hymns, in the Atharva Veda. However, its usage in this text is of great import. We shall come to this shortly.

In the Rig Veda, the word 'maya' is not used in the same sense everywhere. The *Nighantu*, an early collection of Vedic homonyms, mentions 'maya' as one of the eleven names of *prajna*, intelligence. Yaska, in his *Nirukta*, mentions the same meaning for 'maya', *prajna*. Shastri points out:

As a rule, following Yāska, Sāyaṇa in most cases gives the meaning *prajñā*—i.e., energy, mental power as distinguished from physical—but he is not always definite; in fact, he could not be so. ... Tradition—as preserved in Sāyaṇa's commentary—tells us that the two meanings *prajñā* and *kapāṭa* are the most common, and sometimes run parallel. For instance, even in the very first hymn (R.V. i. II. 7), in which the word appears as *māyābhih* (and *māyinam*), Sāyaṇa seems to waver between these two meanings, and leaves the reader to make his own choice (8–9).

As mentioned, 'maya' is not used in the same sense throughout in the Rig Veda. There are some marginal meanings as well. For instance, in 5.31.7, the word means 'a young woman', and according to Shastri, this meaning is unconnected with the predominant meanings of the term. However, Shastri argues that the two chief meanings attributed to the word in the text are 'power', *prajna*, literally knowledge, and 'deception', *kapāṭa* or *vanchana*. He further argues that wherever the word stands for power, the idea of mystery necessarily accompanies it; the word is always used in the sense of a mysterious power of the will.

In the Rig Veda, the term is often used in connection with the marvels of nature, including the appearance of daylight and the creation of the world. Mitra and Varuna are said to cause the sky to rain by their maya. Maya is different from the power of ordinary men; it is a kind of 'incomprehensible ability'. What maya can produce is incredible. In this sense, it may not always be real. The term is often used in connection with a god's ability to transform his external appearance. Thus, it is by virtue of his maya that Indra can assume any form. In the Atharva Veda, we find that the possession of maya or this incomprehensible ability is especially attributed to the asuras. The Jaiminiya Brahmana recounts the story of two asuras who possessed such great maya that they were able to cook rice on 'non-fire'.

Gonda notes that in the Vedic literature, the concept of 'maya' as power was a neutral concept. It is not that it had an obligatory negative connotation associated with it. In order to specify the good or bad nature of the usage of 'maya', further qualifications were required: the Maruts bring rain and are benefactors of humankind; hence, they are *su-maya*, that is, 'of good maya'. Malicious beings moving through the air are *dur-mayu*, that is, they use bad maya. Gonda further notes: 'In the Atharvaveda, the association between asuras and māyā has not yet completely assumed the character of a union of powers antagonistic to the interests of men and the devas who champion their cause. ... But the more the asuras were believed to be 'powers of darkness' the more māyā—though essentially coming within the above definition—was by the authors of the brāhmaṇas viewed in a special light.'<sup>10</sup>

The word 'maya' occurs in different forms in the Shatapatha Brahmana, where it means a kind of wondrous power. Here, Sayana explains 'maya' as *aghatita-ghatana-shaktih*,<sup>11</sup> that is, the power to make the impossible happen. It is



*Sri Ramakrishna's Painting by Swami Tadatmananda*

worth noting here that in *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga*, Swami Saradananda records Sri Ramakrishna's interactions with Tota Puri and mentions the latter's characterisation of 'maya' as *aghatanaghatanapatiyasi*, that is, 'one who is adept at making the impossible happen'.<sup>12</sup>

The Atharva Veda represents a different state of society from that of the Rig Veda. According to Shastri, the mysterious or magical element of the power that is maya is emphasised even more in the Atharva Veda. Unlike as in the Rig Veda, the sense in which the word is used in the Atharva Veda is very clear and there can be no doubt about it—it is used throughout to mean magic or illusion. According to Gonda:

The "mystic" text AV. 10, 8, 34 seems to furnish us with a starting-point for the "special" sense of the term under consideration in later Indian philosophy. Making an attempt to elucidate the relation between the One that is the All and creatures, whether gods or men, the poet resorts

to two images: the creatures rest and originate in the concealed 'centre' of the universe which also is represented as a lotus flower, the roots of which remain hidden in the waters, whereas its stalks spread in the visible world. But if, the poet observes, we would like to ask whence this situation has arisen, the answer must be: *māyā*.<sup>13</sup>

### **Maya in the Upanishads and the Bhagavadgita**

The *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad* contains an important reference to maya: 'The Atman transformed itself in accordance with each form ... That form of the Atman was for the sake of making the Atman known. ... The Lord on account of maya ... is perceived as manifold.'<sup>14</sup> In the *Prashna Upanishad*, the reference to maya is of a different kind: 'The *brahmaloka* is meant for those who are without crookedness, falsehood and maya', understood in this context as pretence.<sup>15</sup>

Then the famous reference to maya appears in the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*: 'The ruler of maya [*mayi*] projects this world. And because of maya, it becomes bound in it as a separate entity, as it were. One should know that Nature [*prakriti*] is surely maya, and the supreme Lord [*maheshvara*] is the ruler of maya [*mayinam*].'<sup>16</sup> Also in another mantra, there is a minor reference to maya: 'The one Deity rules the mutable and the soul. And from the repeated meditation on the Self, union with and contemplation on Reality, there comes about, at the end, the cessation of maya in the form of the universe [*vishva-mayanivritti*]' (1.10). The word *vishvamaya* here means *jagatprapancha*, the universe.

We, thus, see that the word 'maya' is a polysemic term, which was the norm with most Sanskrit words. Different meanings of the word coexist, albeit these meanings are related—in an ordinary context it means pretence, while when spoken of in the context of Brahman or *ishvara*,

it means power and the factor that is responsible for the appearance of manifoldness. We further see that as early as the time of the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad*, it was already conceived that the singular Reality, *Brahman*, appears as manifold on account of maya. One might argue that there is a continuity of idea from the Vedic times in the sense of maya being inscrutable power, producing incredible things, and more subtly, that power, which is responsible for producing a different and non-real form.

We see that in the Vedas, maya was the special power of the devas and the asuras to do incredible things; while in the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, maya is the power of the supreme Lord and is also equated with *prakriti*. Gonda is of the opinion that the use of the terms 'maya' and *mayin* in the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* that eventually developed into the well-known later philosophical concept of maya is essentially same as the usage found in the oldest Vedic texts.<sup>17</sup> He further points out that the later Upanishads too express the same view about maya as the power of the Lord. In the *Nṛisimha-tapaniya Upanishad*, for instance, maya is no other than the power of Nṛisimha. The term 'maya' in fact appears in several other minor and later Upanishads.<sup>18</sup>

Gonda further argues:

In contradistinction to the opinions advanced by other scholars, I would defend the thesis that the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*—which chronologically comes after the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, but before the *Bhagavadgīta*—represents a stage of development in Indian thought, in which the germs which had come up in the preceding period and from which the various philosophical view or metaphysical doctrines of the generations to come were to develop, had already reached the first stage of growth without differentiating in any considerable degree.<sup>19</sup>

And, 'this *māyā* is ... no formula to express the unreality of the world. It only expresses the

impossibility of man's understanding its character and the power of its creator' (171).

We next come to the Gita, whose references to maya are well-known. Sri Krishna says that though he is unborn and eternal and is the Lord of all beings, by being established in his own prakriti, he accepts birth through his own maya.<sup>20</sup> Sri Krishna describes his maya as divine, *daivi*, consisting of the gunas, and hard to overcome; only those who take refuge in him can cross over this maya (7.14). And in the next verse, he says that the evil-doers, who are deprived of knowledge by maya, follow the way of the asuras and do not worship him (7.15). Finally, he makes the famous declaration: 'The Lord dwells in the hearts of all beings, O Arjuna, and by the Lord's maya causes them to revolve as though mounted on a machine' (18.61). In the Gita, once again, we see that it is maya that is responsible for making the impossible possible—the supreme Lord who is without birth and death, appears as a human being of flesh and blood through maya. Maya is a property of the Lord—it is the *Lord's* maya through which the Lord works; that is why maya is divine. Maya is difficult to overcome and obstructs right knowledge.

### **Maya According to Acharya Gaudapada**

There is yet another debate regarding maya: some scholars argue that the later Vedantic concept of maya was not native to Vedic thought—it was either a complete innovation on the part of the Vedantic thinkers or 'an import from Buddhism'.<sup>21</sup> This is, once again, an extreme view. Acharya Gaudapada is known to have first formulated a kind of doctrine of *maya-vada* in Vedanta, and it is true he had his share of Buddhist influences. The debate whether Acharya Gaudapada was a covert Buddhist or not is outside the purview of this article.<sup>22</sup> For



*Acharya Gaudapada*

our purposes, it is sufficient to note that while Acharya Gaudapada was influenced by the Buddhist doctrines of Madhyamika and Yogachara, the paramount difference between Vedanta and Buddhism remained that Buddhism did not talk about the Atman, which is an Upanishadic teaching and which Acharya Gaudapada upholds. In fact, while on many points, Acharya Gaudapada agrees with Mahayana thinkers, on many other points, he criticises their philosophy and attempts to show how Vedanta offers a more sound and better understanding. Mahayana does liken the world to a dream, to maya, mirage, flash of lightning or froth. However, we shall see in the course of this essay that the Vedantic concept of maya evolved in a distinct way of its own.

Here, we shall discuss Acharya Gaudapada's doctrine of maya to see how the concept evolved in his philosophy. The word occurs in sixteen passages of his *Mandukya Karika*. Let us consider some prominent usages. By likening the world

to objects seen in a dream, Acharya Gaudapada gave Advaita Vedanta its characteristic flavour. It is in the context of this dream-like, apparent, and essentially non-real phenomenal world that we encounter an important usage of the word 'maya' in his work: '*Svapnamayasarupeti srishtir anyair vikalpita*; by others it is imagined that creation is comparable to dream or magic.'<sup>23</sup> Here, maya denotes that which does not exist in reality. Acharya Gaudapada also refers to maya as the beginning-less cosmic illusion, *anadimaya*, which, as if puts individual souls to sleep. Then, we have his famous statement: '*Mayamatram idam dvaitam advaitam paramarthatah*'; all this duality that is nothing but maya, is but non-duality in reality' (1.17). That is, the multiplicity of this world is mere illusion and the ultimate reality is non-dual.

Now, how was this illusory appearance of the world brought about? Acharya Gaudapada says: 'The self-effulgent Self imagines itself through itself by the power of its own maya' (2.12). In other words, it is maya that causes the appearance of the non-existent world of multiplicity. That which is *sat*, ever-existent, can never be born. Its apparent birth is only intelligible through maya and not in reality. Without the concept of maya, there can be no doctrine of *ajatavada* or non-origination. T M P Mahadevan writes: 'Gaudapāda employs several expressions to indicate the illusory nature of the world and its things: *māyā*, *vaitathya*, *mithyā*, *kalpita*, *ābhāsa*, *viparyaya*, *saṁvṛti*, etc. *Māyā* is that which is responsible for the world-illusion. It covers the real Self and projects the non-real world. To the one who has Brahman-intuition, however, *māyā* is that which is not' (149).

Thus, Acharya Gaudapada uses the term 'maya' in different senses. In the verse starting with the words '*mayamatram idam dvaitam*', the word 'maya' seems to mean mere appearance.

Again, Acharya Gaudapada also considers maya to be that force or factor that is responsible for creating the appearance of the phenomenal world. Thus, maya is both the false appearance of the phenomenal world as well as the power that is responsible for this appearance.

### Maya According to Acharya Shankara

If the Ultimate Reality is One, how do we perceive multiplicity? Acharya Shankara gives the same answer as Acharya Gaudapada: through maya. In *Vivekachudamani*, Acharya Shankara describes *avidya* or maya as the power of the Lord, *paramesha-shakti*, as beginning-less, *anadi*, and made up of three gunas, *trigunatmika*. It is by maya that the phenomenal universe is produced. Maya can only be inferred from the effects it produces. Further, it is neither existent nor non-existent nor both. It is neither same nor different nor both; neither composed of parts nor an indivisible whole nor both. It is indescribable, *anirvachaniyarupa*. Just as the mistaken idea of a rope as a snake is removed by the discernment of the rope, similarly, maya is destroyed by the realisation of the pure one-without-a-second Brahman.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, maya is the power of the Lord; it is maya that creates the appearance of the phenomenal world; and it is indescribable. Maya has two aspects: one that obscures, *avarana*, the real Self—this is the rajasic element within maya, which is composed of three gunas, and the other that projects, *vikshepana*, the non-self—this is the tamasic element. Acharya Shankara says that the truth of the Self is hidden by maya (65).

Acharya Shankara seems to equate maya and *avidya* (108). There is a debate both within the Vedantic tradition and in the academia if maya and *avidya* are the same thing or are different. There is also a debate within post-Shankara Vedanta regarding the locus of *avidya*.



Chandradhar Sharma captures well Acharya Shankara's conception of maya:

Māyā or Avidyā is not pure illusion. It is not only absence of knowledge. It is also positive wrong knowledge. It is a cross of the real and the unreal (*satyāṅṛte mithuni kṛtya*). In fact, it is indescribable. It is neither existent nor non-existent nor both. It is not existent for the existent is only the Brahman. It is not non-existent for it is responsible for the appearance of the Brahman as the world. It cannot be both existent and non-existent for this conception is self-contradictory. It is called neither real nor unreal (*sadasadvilakṣana*). It is false or *mithyā*. But it is not a non-entity like a hare's horn (*tuchchha*). It is positive (*bhāvarūpa*). It is potency (*shakti*). It is also called superimposition (*adhyāsa*). A shell is mistaken as silver. The shell is the ground on which the silver is superimposed. When right knowledge (*pramā*) arises, this error (*bhrānti* or *bhrama*) vanishes. The relation between the shell and the silver is neither that of identity nor of difference nor of both. It is unique and is known as non-difference (*tādātmya*). Similarly, Brahman is the ground on which the world appears through Māyā. When right knowledge dawns and the essential unity of the *jīva* with the *Paramātman* is realised, Māyā or Avidyā vanishes.<sup>25</sup>

### Mayavada After Acharya Shankara

Post-Sankara Vedantins elaborated on the concept of maya (292–7). A principal debate among them was if maya and *avidya* are same or different. Most treat the two as same and distinguish between the two aspects of *avarana* and *vikshepana*. The adherents of the other school treat maya and *avidya* as distinct entities—the former being positive, absolutely dependent on and inseparable from Brahman, of which it is the *shakti*, while the latter is entirely negative and is defined as ignorance.

For Mandana Mishra, maya and *avidya* are



Acharya Shankara

same. According to him, *avidya* is maya and *mithyabhasa*, false appearance. Furthermore, there are two kinds of *avidya*—absence of knowledge, *agrahana*, and positive wrong knowledge, *anyathagrahana*. Another debate is regarding the locus of *avidya*. For Mandana and Vachaspati Mishra, the individual *jīva* is the locus of *avidya*, whereas for Acharya Sureshvara, Acharya Padmapada, and Prakashatman Yati, Brahman is the locus of *avidya*.

Mandana developed Acharya Shankara's description of maya as indescribable, *anirva-chaniya*. According to Mandana, maya or *avidya* is neither the characteristic nature, *svabhava*, of Brahman nor an entity different, *arthantarāma*, from Brahman. 'It is neither real (*satī*) nor absolutely unreal (*atyantamasatī*). If it is the



characteristic nature of something else, then whether it is identical with or different from it, it is a reality and cannot be called Avidyā. On the other hand, if it is absolutely unreal, then it is like the sky-lotus and can serve no practical purpose which in fact it does. It is therefore indescribable (*Anirvachanīyā*) as it can be described neither as existent nor as non-existent. And all philosophers in order to be consistent must necessarily accept it as such' (292).'

Vimuktatman also maintains that *maya* or *avidya* is neither identical with nor different from nor both identical with and different from Brahman. Acharya Padmapada says that *avidya* is a beginning-less, *anadi*, material, *jadatmika*, power *shakti*. For Shriharsha, *avidya* is positive, material, and indescribable as real or unreal. For Vidyaranya too, *avidya* is a beginning-less power, which is neither real nor unreal.

### Conclusion

Thus, we see that the concept of *maya* is as elusive as *maya* itself! However, inferring from its usage, it is possible to discern the historical evolution of this concept in Hinduism. And on the basis of this historical examination, it is possible to argue that the *core* meaning of *maya* remained more or less the same through Vedic and Vedantic usage. We need to think about the way we understand the historical evolution of ideas. The Vedic concept of *maya* is certainly not identical to the Vedantic concept. However, we can see that the germ of the Vedantic concept was already present in its Vedic counterpart. What accrued later to the concept was its full-fledged philosophical dimensions. Gonda argues for the adoption of 'a 'central' or 'fundamental meaning' which underlies all uses of the term in Vedic, Vedantic, pre-, and non-Vedantic Hindu texts after a thorough philological examination of

all relevant instances. And according to him, this central meaning is 'incomprehensible wisdom and power enabling its possessor, or being able itself, to create, devise, contrive, effect, or do something.'<sup>26</sup>

What was earlier the inscrutable and wondrous power of the devas became the inscrutable and wondrous power of Brahman itself, and thus evolved one of the concept-pillars of Advaita Vedanta. The final form of the concept as it developed at the hands of the Advaita Vedantins<sup>27</sup> has been beautifully described by Eliot Deutsch:

In Brahman-experience (*nirvikalpa samādhi*), ... there is the awareness ... that 'anything beside Brahman lacks full reality'.

It follows, then, that the existence of, or our perception of, an independent, substantial world of real objects, persons, and processes must be grounded in some pervasive error. We take the unreal for the real and the real for the unreal. This is *māyā*.

Whenever the 'I', 'me', or 'mine' is present, according to Advaita, there also is *māyā*. ...

Whenever we transform the impersonal into the personal, that is, when we make Brahman something or someone who cares, we bring about an association of the impersonal with *māyā*. *Māyā* is the ontic-noetic state wherein limitations (*upādhis*) are imposed upon Reality.

All attachments, aversions, fears, dreams, and semidreams are touched with *māyā*. All memories, cognitions, percepts, and logics are grounded in *māyā*. *Māyā* is whenever we fail to realise the oneness of the Real.

And *māyā* is beginningless (*anādi*), for time arises only within it; it is unthinkable (*acintya*), for all thought is subject to it; it is indescribable (*anirvacanīya*), for all language results from it. The level of Appearance is thus *māyā*.<sup>28</sup> ❧

### Notes and References

1. The subtitle of the article is inspired by the

discipline of *Begriffsgeschichte*—the history of concepts or conceptual history, which is of German origin and is a distinct genre of history of ideas with its own methods and set of problems (See Melvin Richter, 'Begriffsgeschichte and the History of Ideas', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 48/2 (April-June 1987), 247–63). In contrast to its predecessor *Ideengeschichte*, history of ideas, *Begriffsgeschichte* attempts at relating concepts to their contexts. It is also different from the earlier philological analyses of the history of individual words. However, there has also been a trend of writing histories of philosophical terminology and philosophical problems, excluding their social history. Given the specific set of problems we encounter while relating the development of ideas to their context in the case of ancient Indian ideas, this essay will focus on the conceptual history of maya without delving into its context of social history.

2. Sheldon Pollock, 'Is There an Indian Intellectual History? Introduction to "Theory and Method in Indian Intellectual History"', *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 36/5–6 (October 2008), 534.
3. The issue of *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 36/5–6 (October 2008) was precisely an attempt at addressing the question of theories and methods in Indian intellectual history.
4. Prabhu Dutt Shastri, *The Doctrine of Māyā: In the Philosophy of the Vedānta* (London: Luzac, 1911), ix.
5. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 2.88–9.
6. For further details on etymology of maya, see Jan Gonda, *Four Studies in the Language of the Veda* (The Hague: Mouton, 1959).
7. *The Doctrine of Māyā*, 29.
8. Jan Gonda, *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1997), 165–6.
9. For details, see *The Doctrine of Māyā*, 6–8.
10. *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion*, 169.
11. *The Doctrine of Māyā*, 16.
12. Swami Saradananda, *Shrishriramakrishnalil-aprasanga* (Bengali), 2 vols (Calcutta: Udbodhan, 1960), 1.168.
13. *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion*, 169.
14. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 2.5.19.
15. *Prashna Upanishad*, 1.16.
16. *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, 4.9–10.
17. See *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion*, 170.
18. For details, see *The Doctrine of Māyā*, 117–9.
19. *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion*, 170–1.
20. See Gita, 4.6.
21. As per Hermann Jacobi, the first person to argue that maya-*vada* is a Vedantic adaptation of Shunyavada was V A Sukhtankar (See Hermann Jacobi, 'On Mayavada', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 33/1 (January-March 1913), 51–4). However, this is in fact a very old argument. Bhaskara, the tenth-century Vedantin who upheld the *bhedabheda* view, was of the opinion that the doctrine of maya-*vada* arose due to the influence of Mahayana Buddhism (See Chandradhar Sharma, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 340). Again, Radhakrishnan cites the instance of *Padma Purana*, where Ishvara says to his wife, Parvati: 'I, myself, goddess, assuming the form of a Brahman, uttered in the Kali age the false doctrine of Maya, which is covert Buddhism, which imputes a perverted and generally censured signification to the words of the Veda and inculcates the abandonment of ceremonial works and an inactivity consequent on such cessation' (S Radhakrishnan, 'The Vedānta Philosophy and the Doctrine of Maya', *The International Journal of Ethics*, 24/4 (July 1914), 433).
22. Surendranath Dasgupta goes to the extent of claiming that Acharya Gaudapada was in fact a Buddhist and not a Vedantin. Swami Nikhilananda has systematically refuted his arguments with evidence. For details, see *The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2013), xii–xxii.
23. Acharya Gaudapada, *Karika on Mandukya Upanishad*, 1.7.
24. Acharya Shankara, *Vivekachudamani*, 108–10.
25. *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*, 252–3.
26. *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion*, 166.
27. Vedantins of other schools do not necessarily accept maya. Acharya Ramanuja, for instance, propounded his sevenfold objections, *saptavidha-anupapatti*, to the doctrine of maya.
28. Eliot Deutsch, *Advaita Vedānta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 1969), 28–9.

# YOUNG EYES

## *Special Needs Children*

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**S**pecial needs children are children who suffer from psychological or physical problems. But unfortunately, most of us tend to look down on them and also discourage all their dreams, although some of us do not do that. We should not discourage special needs children in anything they want to do unless it is wrong or something which can harm them. And the same goes for everybody else. Usually, special needs children are treated unfairly in many ways and they are not treated like all other children, which is wrong.

All children, whether they are special needs or not should be treated equally no matter what. Although special needs children many times need shadow parents and other people to help take care of them, a parent should make sure that a special needs child is not bullied or treated unfairly by the shadow parent or a child at school. Often special needs children cannot stand up for themselves when they are bullied or treated unfairly, so a parent should teach their ward to stand up for herself or himself. However, a special needs child may not be able to stand up for herself or himself because of psychological or physical problems, so when that happens a parent should inform the shadow parent to help the child stand up for herself or himself.

Sometimes a special needs child is told to give up on her or his dreams because she or he is invalid compared to the other children. This is a

very wrong thing that people do to special needs children because a child, whether a special needs child or not, should never be told that she or he is talentless and invalid compared to the other children. Who knows, even a special needs child might have such talent that is not being brought out because a person around that child is discouraging the child in such a way that the child thinks that she or he is not worth it and is not unique in her or his way.

An example of such talent is Stephen Hawking, who in spite of having severe physical problems, became one of the world's great physicists. At school, sometimes a special needs child might be behind the rest of her or his class. When this happens, a child may end up getting really low marks because of which a parent, without understanding the situation, might severely scold the child and also beat the child. This might make the child feel useless, talentless, and invalid than she or he is. A parent usually does this to make the child successful in all ways possible, but this usually backfires in a very drastic way. This can also make a child lose her or his self-confidence and the hope to improve.

Therefore, instead of scolding the child, a parent should search for the right guidance and help for her or his child to improve. At school, there is another problem that may make many special children feel sad and this may also give them problems like anxiety. This problem is

loneliness which may arise because of the lack of friends of the special needs child's age.

This problem can be solved by making the child understand that she or he is as good as any other child and that she or he should put herself or himself out there to make friends. If gradually, the child mixes and blends among the other children she or he will soon make many friends. Sometimes special needs children are made fun of not only by children but also by adults.

When this happens the parents of the child, who is being made fun of, should tell the person doing the same to not do it. And the person doing this should also be made to understand that doing this is wrong and also that doing this can cause the special needs child severe psychological trauma that might be permanent or very hard to heal.

Sometimes, even after getting the right guidance and help, a special needs child might be feeling pressurised, not only by parents but also by the other family members and teachers, who have helped the child. When this happens, a child should be told to do well and also not to be afraid of failing and also not to feel pressurised because it is alright to fail as people can rise again.

Being over-pressurised can also lead to failure. An example of this is when a person flies a plane and is over-pressurised about flying it properly. This person continuously thinks about what will happen if she or he will crash instead of concentrating on how to land it carefully. In this case, the possibility of the plane crashing is quite high. A special needs child might also not be able to understand some of the things we say and if something is bothering the child, she or he may not be able to express her or his



emotions completely. This may happen because of psychological and physical problems as mentioned earlier.

However, this can lead to many communication problems for the special needs child. Fortunately, this can be taken care of in some cases while others might be severe physical problems, including that of the brain, which are incurable. But, if a child suffers from such problems, these problems can be handled by talking with the child as if the child does not have any physical or psychological problems and as though the child is completely normal in every way.

Parents should also talk about serious and deep things with their wards as that will help develop their brains and that will also help them come out of their communication problems. Parents of special needs children, who are born with communication and brain problems, should give their child time to understand what they are saying and they should also let their children express their emotions with time and care. Parents should try not to hurry their children up, while they are trying to understand what is being said and when they are trying to express their emotions because that will not help them with their problem and that might also worsen their communication problems.

# BALABODHA

*Ancient Wisdom Made Easy*

## Advaita


**T**he word 'Advaita' is a commonly used Sanskrit word. It is used by people, who do not even know Sanskrit, as it is present in almost every Indian language. The widely used meaning of the word 'Advaita' is non-duality. However, it is necessary to see the other meanings and the origins of this Sanskrit word. Sanskrit is a classical language like Greek, Latin, and Persian. And in Sanskrit, as in most classical languages, most words are derived from a stem or root.

The word 'Advaita' is formed as an antonym of *dvaita* by adding the prefix 'a' to the word *dvaita*, in the sense of the opposite. So, the opposite of *dvaita*, which means duality, is non-duality. The word *dvaita* is derived from adding the 'an' suffix to the root word *dvi*, which means two. The word *dvaita* means duality, a pair, difference, separation, duplicity, dualism, or doubt. The word 'Advaita' means non-duality; one without a second; identity; non-separation; non-different; having no duplicate; destitute of duality; peerless; sole; unique; epithet of Vishnu; the identity of Brahman, *paramatman* or supreme soul with the *jivatman* or the individual soul; the identity of spirit and matter; the name of an Upanishad, and the ultimate Truth.

Advaita is one among the three main schools of Vedanta, the other two being Vishishtadvaita and Dvaita. Acharya Shankara is considered to be the proponent of Advaita Vedanta, though the philosophy was present even before him as is evident in the writings of teachers like Acharya Gaudapada. The Advaita philosophy holds that there is

essentially no difference between the individual soul and the ultimate Reality and all difference that is perceived is due to ignorance. Any perception of duality is considered a result of superimposition.

The common examples given for explaining this superimposition are the mistaking a shell to be silver, mistaking sand for water in a mirage, mistaking a rope to be a snake in darkness. In all these instances, something else is superimposed on some other thing and there is a mutual confusion of the properties of the things involved. For example, in a mirage, the property of water is imposed on sand and the property of sand is imposed on water. When insentience is superimposed on sentience and when sentience is superimposed on insentience, we confuse things for what they are not and there arises the problem of *dvaita* or duality. Advaita is the path to transcend this superimposed duality.

The goal of Advaita is to guide a person to transcend all suffering and attain moksha, freedom from the transmigratory cyclical existence of samsara, by realising the identity of the Atman with Brahman. Upon this realisation, this universe ceases to cause any misery, because the person who has realised this knowledge of Advaita, understands that this universe is being seen not in its essential nature, Brahman, but in its superimposed nature of a multitude of names and forms. When the essence of this universe is realised and it is known that one is not different from that essence, then a person becomes free. 

# TRADITIONAL TALES

## *The Best Giver*

In the days of yore, there lived a famous gambler. Engaged in the evil profession of gambling, he insulted gods and brahmanas. He was the storehouse of all the vices in the world. One day, he won great wealth due to his trickery. Being overjoyed, he rolled a paan and taking items of makeup like sandal paste and flower-garland, he speedily proceeded to the house of a prostitute. On the way, he lost his balance, fell, and became unconscious. Upon regaining consciousness, he experienced a change in him. He became very concerned with his evil ways. He developed intense dispassion. Then, getting some clarity, with a clear mind, he offered whatever he had in his hands to a Shiva temple nearby and returned to his house. That was the only virtuous act he had done in his entire life.

Time went by and the gambler's life came to an end one day. The messengers of the god of death, Yama, took the gambler to the Yama's abode. Yama told the gambler: 'O fool! You will suffer severely in hell for all your evil deeds.' The gambler trembled hearing these words and prayed: 'O lord! Is it not possible that I have done some virtuous thing also? Please look into its result and give me your final judgement.' Yama looked at his record-keeper Chitragupta.

Chitragupta said: 'Before your death, you had offered a little sandal paste to Shiva linga. As a result of this good deed, you get to be the king of heaven and sit on heaven's throne for three *nazhigas* or seventy-two minutes.'

Gambler: 'If that be the case, please allow me to first experience the time I have earned in



*Sculpture of the Dikpala Yama*

heaven. Then, I will suffer, whatever I have to, in hell.'

Immediately, the gambler was sent to heaven on Yama's orders. Brihaspati, the guru of the devas, called Indra, the king of the devas, and explained to him how the gambler needed to be



*Indra at Tavatimsa Heaven*

the king of heaven for seventy-two minutes and asked Indra to leave the throne to the gambler for that time. Brihaspati told Indra that he could return to his throne after seventy-two minutes.

The moment Indra stepped down from his throne, the gambler became the king of heaven. He had seventy-two minutes to himself. He thought: 'I have no one to surrender to other than Lord Shiva.' His attachment towards material objects started to weaken. Soon, he began giving away in charity many things according to his power. Now Lord Shiva's devotee, the gambler gave away Indra's famous elephant named Airavata as a gift to Sage Agastya. He gave the horse named Uchchaishravas to the great rishi Vishvamitra. He gave the cow named Kamadhenu to Maharishi Vasishtha. He gave the precious stone named Chintamani to Maharishi Kalava. He uprooted the Kalpavriksha tree and gifted it to Sage Kaundinya. In this manner, he kept on giving away things in charity for his time of seventy-two minutes. He gave away all the

valuable things of heaven. As soon as seventy-two minutes passed, he stepped down from the throne.

The king of the devas, Indra returned to find the city of Amaravati, the heaven or the world of Indra, depleted of wealth and robbed of splendour. He hastened to his guru Brihaspati and took him to Yama. He angrily told Yama: 'O lord! You have done the most inappropriate thing by giving away my throne to a gambler. He did many undue things when on the throne. He gave away for real, all my

precious stones as gifts to sages. Please come and see the city of Amaravati. You will see for yourself how vacant it looks as though it has been looted.'

Yama said to Indra: 'O Indra! You have aged and become an old man. Yet, your attachment to ruling and administration has not waned even a bit. The gambler has acquired so much merit from his actions that his merit has much surpassed the merits you have acquired by doing hundreds of rituals. One who engages in good deeds without even a little pride, even after being given great power, is indeed a great person. Go to the sages. Give them what they ask or beg them and get back all your precious stones.'

Hearing this, Indra said, 'Let it be so', and returned. The gambler was freed from living in hell. In his next lifetime, he was born as the son of the great giver and ascetic Virochana and was named Bali.<sup>1</sup>



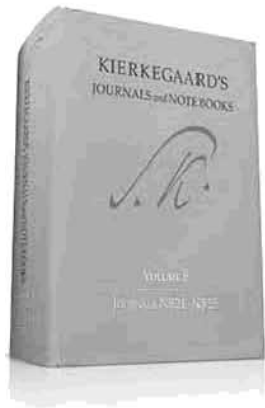
### Notes

1. This story is adapted from *Skanda Purana*, Maheshvara Kanda, Kedara Kanda, Chapter 18.



# REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,  
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## **Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks, Volume 8: Journals NB21–NB25**

Søren Kierkegaard  
Edited by Niels Bruce  
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Hannay, David D Possen,  
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9780691166186.

Søren Kierkegaard is the first modernist, only preceded by Desiderius Erasmus. It is the disregard for Erasmus as the first Renaissance philosopher who ushered in the modernist turn in Western philosophy and literature alike, that has consigned Kierkegaard to being considered only a Christian philosopher.

It is only anecdotal that Kierkegaard injected scepticism into Christianity and did more damage to Christendom than the atheist Friedrich Nietzsche ever could. This is a wrong assessment since Kierkegaard refashioned early and late modernism into what it really was: the European Renaissance did not reject Christianity as is often wrongly taught, but it was a deeply Christian and faith-informed theological movement, which we now mistakenly read as non-Christian philosophy.

In passing we should remark that all Western philosophy after the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is either a confirmation of Christianity or a reaction to the Logos. The former we find in the works of Hannah Arendt, for instance, her dissertation on St Augustine of Hippo is a proof of

Christianity's power over Arendt's crypto-Zionism, and the latter is to be found both in the charlatan Nazi, Martin Heidegger's works and in Derrida's minor reflections on the Logos. The point here is that Christian theology is Western philosophy and only Kierkegaard understood this and was fearless enough to pen it all down. In his *Christian Discourses: The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, Kierkegaard writes this of what it means to be free, what it means to live the Beatitudes:

To be without care—indeed, it is a difficult walk, almost like walking on water, but if you are able to have faith, then it can be done. In connection with all danger, the main thing is to be able to get away from the thought of it. Now, you cannot get away from poverty, but you can get away from the thought of it by continually thinking about God: this is how the Christian walks *his* course. He turns his gaze upward and looks away from the danger; in his poverty, he is without the care of poverty. But the thoughts of the one who wants to be rich are continually on the earth; in his care he is on the earth, with his care is on the earth; he walks bowed down, continually looking ahead to see if he might be able to find riches. He is continually looking ahead—alas, ordinarily this is the best way to avoid temptation, but for him, yes, he does not know it, for him looking ahead is the very way to walk into the pitfall, the way to finding the temptation greater and greater and to sinking deeper and deeper into it. He is already in the power of the temptation, because the care is the temptation's most ingenious servant. And the temptation is down on the earth ... the temptation is down on the earth—the more it gets a person to look downward, the more certain is his downfall. What is *the temptation* that in itself is many temptations? Certainly it is not the glutton's temptation to live



in order to eat; no (what rebellion against the divine order!), it is to live *in order to slave*. The temptation is this, to lose oneself, to lose one's soul, to cease to be a human being and live as a human being instead of being freer than the bird, and godforsaken to slave more wretchedly than the animal. Yes, to slave! Instead of *working* for the daily bread, which every human being is commanded to do, to *slave* for it—and yet not be satisfied by it, because the care is to become rich. Instead of *praying* for the daily bread, to *slave* for it—because one became a slave of people and of one's care and forgot that it is to God one must pray for it. Instead of being willing to be what one is, poor, but also loved by God, which one certainly is, never happy in oneself, never happy in God, to damn oneself and one's life to this slaving in despondent grief day and night, in dark and brooding dejection, in spiritless busyness, with the heart burdened by worry about making a living—smitten with avarice although in poverty! (*Christian Discourses: The Crisis and A Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, ed. and trans. Howard V Hong and Edna H Hong (Princeton: Princeton University, 2009), 21–2).

It is of this philosophy of being without care derived from the Lord's prayer in the New Testament that Kierkegaard stresses in the volume under review: 'Owing to the rigor with which Xnty [Christianity] was originally insisted upon, the unyieldingness of blood witnesses, Xnty prevailed and was victorious, reshaped the world, tempered morals, etc' (241).

Kierkegaard says further: 'With respect to finite and worldly goods (which precisely because of their inferiority and are not essentially related to any reduplication), the mode in which I obtain them (provided it is not impermissible) is pretty much a matter of indifference, and it can easily become prudishness to be too strict in this connection' (243).

Further, quoting Girolamo Savonarola, Kierkegaard says: 'The power of faith is secure in dangers, but in danger when a person is secure' (340).

Kierkegaard's modernity lies in his awareness of unguarded, emotional spirituality giving way to prudishness. Unlike the English Puritans, who **having butchered hundreds, perversely called themselves pure**, we have a truly holy man who

preferred ignominy and anonymity warning us of **prudishness which destroys souls**. Kierkegaard's warnings against pharisaic ways is what is modern in literature. Only much later, Sigmund Freud iteratively figured out that prudishness is psychologically debilitating. This insight into puritanism's destructiveness is enough to prove Kierkegaard's modernity.

Karl Marx in a very different context, spoke of the need for philosophy to be practical and not merely pragmatic. Kierkegaard too wants *realpolitik* within philosophising and thus, insists on dying for one's beliefs unlike the priests portrayed in Shusaku Endo's *Silence*. **Armchair religious praxes are of no use. Running fancy and coveted normatively religious educational institutes are of no value unless one can teach students that education is laying down one's life for the sake of their beliefs.** Even if these beliefs are wrong. Che Guevara was intellectually wrong in **his moral conclusions but unlike Fidel Castro**, Guevara did not sell himself to capitalist forces which as Kierkegaard shows in *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress* mentioned above, are detrimental to any philosophising.

**That consumerism and capitalism are both evils** is a modernist Weltanschauung. Modernism arose from the triple sources of the refashioning and not the rejection of the religious sensibility; modernism arose from a deeper understanding of the death grip of capitalism, and finally, it arose in the insecurity which characterises our existence in the here and the now. Kierkegaard's quotation from Savonarola is itself proof of Kierkegaard's understanding of religion and life. He knew much before Karl Jaspers, Martin Buber, and Jean-Paul Sartre that security is death. No person is alive who feels certain that there are no uncertainties in the very business of living out any kind of human life; leave alone spiritual lives.

Princeton University Press through publishing these journals and notebooks has done a commendable task in popularising Kierkegaard's magnificent oeuvre.

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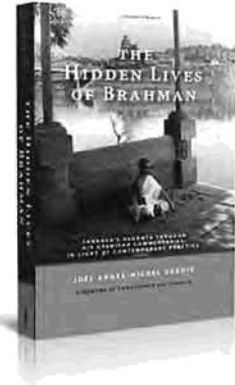
# MANANA

**Exploring thought-currents from around the world.  
Extracts from a thought-provoking book every month.**

## ***The Hidden Lives of Brahman***

Joël André-Michel Duboi

State University of New York Press, 353 Broadway, State University Plaza, Albany, NY 12246-0001, USA. Website: <https://www.sunypress.edu>. 2013. 451 pp. \$27.95. PB. ISBN 9781438448053.



Calmly avoiding oncoming buses as they walk through Śrīngeri's main street, men and women return from their early morning ritual baths at the river's edge. Today is the first day of Śaṅkara's Jayanti celebration, the day after the new moon in April, but few people seem to know about it. Hidden to the side of the town's *maṭha*, its center of teaching and worship, hidden from the open terraces crossed daily by hundreds of pilgrims making their way to the large riverside stone temples for which Śrīngeri is famous, a much smaller wooden temple shelters an icon of Śaṅkara. Inside its enclosure, a brāhmaṇa has removed the metal shell that usually covers the stone statue, revealed only on special occasions like this one, and bathes it with water. Several dozen brāhmaṇa men wrapped in traditional bordered white cloth gather outside the temple, sitting on the veranda of the quarters that surround and conceal it.

Men, both young and old, sit in groups of three or four; some sit on straw mats, while others stand, reciting the three-tone melodic patterns of veda. These are the hymns and ritual formulas originally composed and chanted in Saṁskṛta (often anglicized as 'Sanskrit') during elaborate fire-offering rituals known as *yajñas*, among the most ancient rituals of Hindu tradition. Few brāhmaṇas today perform *yajñas*, yet

many still memorize with extreme precision the hymns and other recitations composed and compiled over many generations to accompany the ritual. On this morning, each group is chanting the veda of its own lineage learned by heart from fathers and teachers; long ago, each lineage would have been expected to fulfill a different ritual function in communal *yajñas*, but here the distinct sounds all blend together.

Scattered between these clusters of chanters, several other brāhmaṇas sit by themselves. Each stares down at a book propped up on a short wooden desk, muttering the text to himself. Some books contain praise verses describing the purported events of Śaṅkara's life; others summarize his ideas, and still others are his own commentaries—most of them on *upaniṣads* (also sometimes designated *vedāntas* in the plural), stories and proclamations about the mystical insight inspired by fire-offering. Those who study Śaṅkara's vedānta teachings and commentaries usually recite them individually, rather than intoning them in groups. Today, the neighboring intonations of veda drown out such vedānta mutterings, but the mutterers persist all the same.

As the morning wears on, dozens of young boys from Śrīngeri's vedic school (*pāṭhaśālā*) begin to arrive, also dressed in white. Advanced

students join the groups of older men reciting veda, who examine the boys to see how well they have memorized their assigned portions. Most students, however, gather before the steps of the Śaṅkara temple and recite the better-known vedic hymns and ritual formulas taught to all brāhmaṇa boys at Śṛṅgeri, if they have not already learned them at home. In this group the higher pitches of prepubescent voices combine with the lower tones of the older boys, rivaling in volume the veda recitations of the older men.

At the back of the veranda, finally, stands a student of a different kind, watching the icon of Śaṅkara and the men gathered around it from a distance. Though dressed in white like everyone else, his pale skin color, peculiar facial features, and gray backpack all betray a foreign origin. From his remote vantage point the distinct sounds of recitation blend into a single mass of sound, which seems to him to bathe the icon of Śaṅkara like the water being poured over it. Yet as he approaches and sits near individual reciters, chatting with them and asking about their recitation, he discerns different melodies and sounds. The school's students, teachers, and local residents are by now familiar with the peculiar American visitor, freely answering his many questions posed in clumsy Kannada, the local language. The brāhmaṇa guests who have come to recite at this festival, however, are more cautious, keeping their distance from him.

That evening, in the larger audience hall adjacent to the Śaṅkara temple, the same brāhmaṇas return once again to honor Śaṅkara. This time, however, the voices that had competed and blended together at the morning session are distributed differently. In the morning, the praises, ideas, and comments of Śaṅkara himself were barely audible. Now in the evening praise of

Śaṅkara's ideological 'victory' over competing points of view, brāhmaṇas feature these very same comments, ideas, and praises in public speeches, delivered into microphones and broadcast by loudspeaker to the entire temple grounds and to most of the town. Much briefer veda recitations, on the other hand, merely begin and end the program, like a decorative frame.

This shift in emphasis from the raw power of sound and gesture in worship to eloquent proclamations of Śaṅkara's teaching manifests also in the spatial focus of the evening proceedings. The stone icon is out of sight; now all gather around the living representative of Śaṅkara's lineage at Śṛṅgeri, a bearded man on a silver throne, dressed in ochre robes lined with gold borders. Ochre cloth is the traditional mark of one who has renounced all ties to family life and its accompanying rituals, as Śaṅkara himself reportedly did, to devote himself exclusively to the pursuit of spiritual goals. In formal announcements, this ochre-clad man is known either as *jagad-guru* ('world-teacher') or by his proper name, Bhāratī Tīrtha. In common discourse, he is often simply the *ācārya* ('[teacher] of *ācāra*' or tradition), a title often appended to Śaṅkara's name ('Śaṅkarācārya'). To most of Śṛṅgeri's residents and frequent visitors he is 'Svāmiji' ('master,' a common term of address for renunciators). Reciters, speakers, and dignitaries all sit to either side, the brāhmaṇa students in front, and behind them many other spectators—town residents, pilgrims, and of course the curious looking foreigner, now in shirt and pants, equipped with notebook and tape recorder.

Narasimha Mūrti, the young principal of Śṛṅgeri's traditional school for the study of veda, welcomes everyone. He then quotes a well-known verse of the Bhagavad Gītā, thus setting the theme that will be broadcast repeatedly throughout this and subsequent evenings. ❧

# REPORTS

## ***Commemoration of the 125th Anniversary of Swami Vivekananda's Addresses at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, USA***

**India: Bamunmura:** A devotees' convention on 24 November 2019 attended by 365 devotees. **Kochi:** A students' convention on 18 November in which nearly 150 students from different higher secondary schools participated. **Mumbai:** A day-long programme at an auditorium in Mumbai on 23 November. Justice Pinaki Chandra Ghose, Lokpal of India, inaugurated the programme. Swami Suvirananda, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, and a few others addressed the gathering of about 900 people, comprising mainly college students. **Outside India: Lusaka, Zambia:** A public meeting on 24 November in which Srimat Swami Gautamanandaji Maharaj, Vice-President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission and Adhyaksha, Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, and few others addressed a gathering of 83 people.

## ***News of Branch Centres***

**Ramakrishna Mission, Aalo,** conducted three health awareness camps in three nearby villages on 20 and 29 August and 12 September which were attended by 210 people in all. The centre also conducted a medical camp in Mori village near Aalo on 12 September in which 80 patients were treated.

**Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Asansol,** held a medical camp in Chittaranjan on 1 September in which 611 patients were treated by 8 doctors.

**Ramakrishna Mission, Delhi,** added a



*Devotees' Convention at Bamunmura*

digital section to its public library in August.

**Ramakrishna Math, Hyderabad,** observed the 20th foundation day of its Vivekananda Institute of Human Excellence by holding a convention for the faculty members of engineering colleges on 9 September and a youths' convention on 10 September. In all, 2,300 people took part in the programmes.

**Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Jalpaiguri,** conducted medical camps on 24 and 25 September in which a team of 20 doctors and 15 paramedical staff checked 1,220 patients and prescribed medicines. A blood donation camp was also held on 25 September in which 43 people donated blood.

**Ramakrishna Math, Madurai,** conducted a dental check-up camp on 6 September in which 62 students were examined and 48 of them were treated.

**Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Malda,** held a medical camp at a village in Malda district on 15 September in which 127 patients were treated.

Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya, Barrackpore, presented the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial



*The President of India, Sri Ram Nath Kovind Inaugurated the Sarada Block at Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Vrindavan*

Award to **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Sargachhi**, on 2 October, Gandhi Jayanti, in recognition of its service activities. The award consisted of a certificate, a memento, and a sum of ten thousand rupees.

Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina and Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi jointly inaugurated Vivekananda Bhavan at **Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Dhaka**, on 5 October through videoconferencing.

The year-long centenary celebrations of **Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Bhubaneswar**, began with a two-day programme on 31 October and 1 November. Srimat Swami Gautamanandaji Maharaj inaugurated the celebrations. Sri Dharmendra Pradhan, Union Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas and Steel, Smt. Aparajita Sarangi, Member of Parliament, Swami Suvirananda and about 500 monks, devotees, and admirers attended the programme.

Srimat Swami Gautamanandaji Maharaj

dedicated two new exhibits in the Vivekananda Exhibition of **Ramakrishna Mission, Delhi**, on 12 November. The new exhibits are based on virtual reality and augmented reality technologies.

Srimat Swami Shivamayanandaji Maharaj, Vice-President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, and the Governor of Meghalaya Sri Tathagata Roy inaugurated an ultrasound machine in the dispensary of **Ramakrishna Mission, Shillong**, on 13 November.

Sri Banwarilal Purohit, Governor of Tamil Nadu, visited **Ramakrishna Math, Chennai**, on 19 November.

Sri Ram Nath Kovind, President of India, inaugurated the Sarada Block of the hospital at **Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Vrindaban**, on 28 November in an impressive function which was also attended by the Governor of Uttar Pradesh, Smt Anandiben Patel and the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Sri Yogi Adityanath, apart from a few ministers and other dignitaries. Built as per



*Inauguration of New Exhibits at Delhi Centre*

NABH (National Accreditation Board for Hospitals and Healthcare Providers) standards, the new state-of-the-art block houses MRI and CT scan facilities, two modular operation theatres, a cancer ward, and a number of other departments and facilities.

### **Values Education and Youth Programmes**

**Bagda Math** held values education programmes in 11 schools of Purulia district from 6 to 26 September. In all, about 2,067 students and 138 teachers attended these programmes.

**Davanagere** centre conducted a values education workshop on 23 October in which 74 teacher-trainees took part.

**Delhi** centre conducted 13 values education workshops in 5 towns and cities in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh between 23 September and 18 October. A total of 752 teachers attended the workshops. It also conducted 13 values education workshops in Ajmer, Delhi, Hyderabad, Kolkata, and Pune from 20 to 26 November. A total of 126 principals and 686 teachers attended the workshops.

**Gadadhar Ashrama** held a values education programme on 19 October, which was attended by 60 students.

**Madurai** centre conducted a values education programme at a school in Madurai on 15



*Youths' Convention at Kanpur Centre*

October and another similar programme at the centre on 19 October. In all, about 1,000 students attended the programmes.

**Haripad Math** held values education camps at three schools in Alappuzha district on 11, 14, and 15 November, which were attended by 553 students in all.

**Kanpur** centre conducted a youths' convention on 17 November in which 240 youths from different educational institutions participated.

**Koyilandy** centre held a youths' convention on 16 November in which 70 students took part.

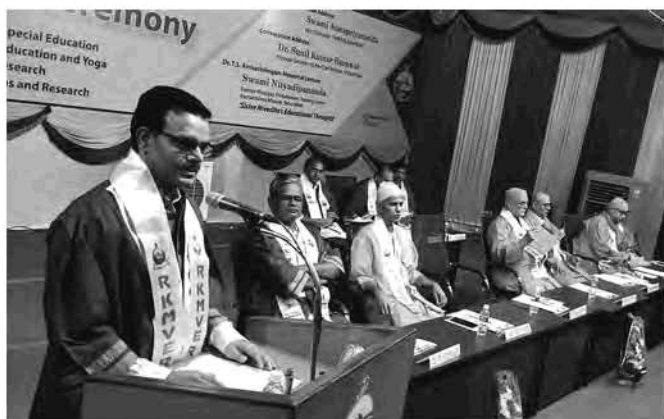
**Rajkot Ashrama** conducted 9 values education programmes from 18 to 22 November in which 682 students from 5 schools participated.

**Vadodara** centre held values education programmes at 11 schools in Chota Udepur, Panchmahal and Vadodara districts of Gujarat from 31 October to 28 November. In all, 3,755 students participated in these programmes.

**Belagavi** (Belgaum) Ashrama held, from 16 to 27 October, a youths' convention and three devotees' conventions at its Swami Vivekananda Memorial and satsang in eight places in the city in commemoration of Swami Vivekananda's visit to Belagavi from 16 to 27 October 1892.

**Ootacamund** (Ooty) centre conducted a district-level sports competition from 11 to 24 October in which 700 students from 30 schools





RKMVERI Convocation at Coimbatore Centre

participated in throwball, volleyball, football, and kho kho events.

**Aalo** centre held a medical camp at Humoli, a remote village near Aalo, on 26 November in which 60 patients were treated.

**Asansol** centre conducted a blood donation camp on 22 November in which 101 students of the centre's ITI donated blood.

**Bajepratappur** centre, Bardhaman, held two camps at its rural development unit in Aeorah, Bhatar Block, on 2 October: (i) a medical camp in which 850 patients were treated, and (ii) a blood donation camp in which 84 people donated blood.

**Guwahati** centre conducted a medical camp at Makaria village in Morigaon district of Assam on 14 November in which 384 patients were treated.

**Kailashahar** Ashrama held a blood donation camp on 2 November in which 64 people donated blood.

The off-campus centre of Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Educational and Research Institute, **RKMVERI** (deemed university) in **Coimbatore Mission Vidyalaya** held the 14th convocation on 9 November. In all, 202 successful candidates were awarded certificates and degrees. Dr Sunil Kumar Barnwal, Principal Secretary to the Chief Minister of Jharkhand, delivered the convocation address.

Srimat Swami Gautamanandaji Maharaj



Swachchha Bharat Abhiyan by Mangaluru Centre

inaugurated the newly set-up MRI scan facility at **Vrindaban** hospital on 14 November.

### **Swachchha Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Campaign)**

**Kamarpukur** centre held cleanliness drives at Kamarpukur on 22 September and 20 October.

**Mangaluru** Ashrama conducted the following activities in September: (i) five cleanliness drives in Mangaluru involving about 6,530 volunteers, (ii) daily awareness campaign for 25 days in which volunteers reached out to 1,850 households in different parts of Mangaluru and spread awareness about cleanliness, (iii) cleanliness drives in 172 villages of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts, (iv) magic shows on the cleanliness theme in 4 schools in Udupi district which were attended by 2,300 students in all, (v) workshops on cleanliness in 106 schools in which 10,636 students participated, and (vi) a seminar on Clean India on 14 September attended by 700 youths.

**Jaipur** centre held a cleanliness drive in its neighbourhood on 2 October.

### **Relief**

**Flood Relief:** In response to the floods in various parts of the country, the following centres conducted relief operations mentioned below:



*Flood Relief in Wayanad by Kalady Centre*



*Flood Relief by Patna Centre*

(i) **Kerala:** (a) **Haripad** centre distributed 2,000 kg firewood, 600 pieces of disposable timber, 15 coconuts, vegetables, and other necessary items among flood-affected families in Alappuzha district from 13 to 19 August.

(b) **Kalady** centre distributed 3,000 kg rice, 550 kg dal, 550 kg sugar, 1,608 shirts, 1,892 trousers, 1,100 lungis, 1,100 ladies' garments, 1,100 bedsheets, 550 bars of soap, 550 vials of antiseptic lotion, 1,100 mats, 550 mugs, 550 jugs, and 550 buckets among 550 families in Wayanad district on 1 September.

(ii) **Gujarat:** **Vadodara** centre distributed 1,370 food packets and 48 saris among affected people in August. The centre also gave 4 ration kits—each kit containing 10 kg flour, 4 kg rice, 1.5 kg dal, 1 kg edible oil, 1 kg salt, 1 kg sugar, 250 gram tea leaves, and 200 gram assorted spices—to 4 affected families on 30 August.

(iii) **Maharashtra:** **Pune** centre distributed 7,130 kg *jowar*, sorghum flour, 700 kg dal, 700 kg assorted spices, 500 kg edible oil, 700 blankets, 500 bedsheets, 700 mats, and 200 sets of utensils—each set consisting of 4 plates, 5 bowls, 5 tumblers, 7 spoons, 3 pots, 1 *tava*, frying pan, and 1 rolling pin and board—among 878 affected families in Sangli, Satara, and Kolhapur districts from 7 to 30 August. The centre again served 4,000 packets of cooked

food and distributed 400 kg rice, 400 kg flour, 200 kg dal, 50 kg assorted spices, 200 kg salt, 200 litres edible oil, 25 kg tea leaves, and 400 kg sugar among 200 families from 26 September to 14 October.

(iv) **Bihar:** (a) **Patna** centre distributed 100 kg *chira*, rice flakes, 250 kg *sattu*, gram flour, 600 packets of biscuits, 5,600 packets of fruit juice, 1,125 kg glucose powder, 2,000 saris, 1,284 sets of children's garments, 1,250 mosquito-nets, and 50,000 halogen tablets among 3,460 families from 28 September to 21 October.

(b) **Purnea** centre distributed 6,000 kg rice, 2,400 kg dal, 600 kg soya, 6,600 kg potatoes, 1,250 saris, and 1,248 lungis among 1,238 families from 17 to 24 October.

(v) **West Bengal:** **Malda** centre distributed 3,500 kg rice, 510 kg dal, 2,650 kg potatoes, 600 kg salt, and 500 litres edible oil among 591 families from 8 to 12 October.

**Distress Relief:** The following centres distributed various items, shown against their names, to needy people: **India:**

(a) **Aalo:** 396 shirts, 396 trousers, 148 sweaters, 1,120 notebooks, 672 pencils, 224 erasers, and 224 sharpeners from 28 August to 19 September; and 186 shirts and 186 trousers on 1 November.

(b) **Antpur:** 1,000 trousers and 500 jackets from 30 August to 13 September.





Distress Relief by Dibrugarh Centre

(c) **Bagda**: 867 shirts, 867 trousers, 160 saris, 140 lungis, and 875 torches from 6 to 29 September.

(d) **Bajepratappur**, Bardhaman: 1,000 shirts, 1,000 trousers, pieces of cloth for 3,000 shirts, 500 dhotis, 500 saris, and 500 *uttariyas* from 7 September to 27 October.

(e) **Balaram Mandir**, Kolkata: 194 shirts on 28 September.

(f) **Baranagar Math**, Kolkata: 15 dhotis, 390 saris, and 407 sets of children's garments on 28 September.

(g) **Baranagar Mission**, Kolkata: 70 dhotis, 250 lungis, 1,201 saris, 628 shirts, 120 T-shirts, 628 trousers, 144 sets of ladies' garments, 289 sets of children's garments, 415 frocks, 287 undergarments, 80 mosquito-nets, and 104 water filters from 28 September to 6 October.

(h) **Barasat**: 466 saris and 158 dhotis from 29 September to 2 October.

(i) **Barisha**: 646 shirts and 200 saris from 18 to 24 September.

(j) **Chandipur**: 5 saris and 1 bicycle from 26 September to 7 October.

(k) **Cuttack**: 300 shirts and 300 trousers from 19 July to 29 August; and 300 shirts and 300 trousers from 21 September to 4 October.

(l) **Davanagere**: 24 shirts on 25 September.



Distress Relief by Dibrugarh Centre

(m) **Dibrugarh**: 120 saris on 28 September.

(n) **Gadadhar Ashrama**, Kolkata: 283 saris and 30 children's garments from 24 September to 2 October.

(o) **Gourhati**: 55 dhotis, 220 saris, 1,000 shirts, and 1,000 trousers from 2 to 26 September.

(p) **Gurap**: 160 saris, 121 dhotis, 5 *uttariyas* and 103 sets of children's garments from 19 September to 1 October.

(q) **Guwahati**: 160 mosquito-nets and 270 saris from 13 to 28 September; and 608 shirts and 1,715 trousers from 13 September to 14 November.

(r) **Hatamuniguda**: 525 vests from 9 to 16 November.

(s) **Indore**: 104 saris, 800 shirts, and 800 trousers from 10 to 24 November.

(t) **Kailashahar**: 500 shirts, 500 trousers, 140 dhotis, and 144 saris on 29 September; and 175 dhotis, 178 saris, 500 shirts, and 500 trousers from 29 September to 26 October.

(u) **Kankurgachhi**: 85 dhotis and 85 saris from 4 to 27 October.

(v) **Kasundia**, Howrah: 1,000 T-shirts, 7 dhotis, 497 saris, 10 frocks, and 154 sets of children's garments from 16 September to 1 October.

(w) **Kathamrita Bhavan**, Kolkata: 245 saris, 2,000 shirts, and 500 trousers from 14 July to 29 September.



*Distress Relief by Madurai Centre*

(x) **Koyilandy:** 320 shirts, 180 T-shirts, 500 trousers, 1 cooker, 6 cooking vessels, 6 buckets, and 6 ladles from 10 to 20 November.

(y) **Lalgarh:** 700 shirts and 700 trousers from 7 September to 15 November.

(z) **Madurai:** 2,000 shirts from 2 to 25 October.

(aa) **Malda:** 193 dhotis, 80 lungis, 205 saris, 62 shirts or T-shirts, 237 trousers, 551 sweaters or sweatshirts, 452 sets of children's garments, 150 kg flour, 120 kg sugar, and 60 litres of edible oil from 24 August to 29 September.

(bb) **Manasadwip:** 1,800 saris from 5 to 22 September.

(cc) **Nagpur:** 1,000 shirts and 1,000 trousers from 1 December 2018 to 10 October 2019.

(dd) **Naora:** 250 shirts, 1,250 T-shirts, 250 trousers, 1,500 tops, 210 dhotis, and 1,000 saris from 28 September to 3 October.

(ee) **Narottam Nagar:** 706 shirts, 915 trousers, and 209 tops on 27 and 30 September.

(ff) **Nattarampalli:** 500 shirts and 500 trousers from 21 to 25 August.

(gg) **Puri Mission:** 842 shirts and 532 trousers from 4 to 30 November.

(hh) **Rahara, Kolkata:** 5 dhotis, 14 lungis, 324 saris, 6 ladies' garments, 805 shirts, 865 T-shirts, 901 trousers, 78 sets of children's garments, 3



*Distress Relief by Rahara Centre*

towels, and 100 mosquito-nets from 23 August to 28 September.

(ii) **Rajarhat Bishnupur:** 500 shirts and 500 trousers from 10 to 24 September and 250 saris from 27 September to 2 October.

(jj) **Rajkot:** 837 shirts, 153 T-shirts, and 1,012 trousers from 30 March to 20 April.

(kk) **Ramanathapuram:** 50 saris, 75 sets of children's garments, and 375 notebooks on 24 October.

(ll) **Ramharipur:** 2,000 shirts and 1,000 trousers from 25 August to 4 October.

(mm) **RKMVERI, Belur:** 28 school bags from 18 February to 12 September.

(nn) **Salem:** 500 T-shirts, 500 trousers, 57 saris, 57 lungis, 57 shirts, 8 sets of children's garments, 114 towels, 122 bars of soap, 122 tubes of toothpaste, and 122 vials of hair oil from 18 to 22 October; and 118 bedsheets, 118 buckets, and 118 mugs on 16 November.



*Cyclone Relief by Puri Mission Centre*

(oo) **Saradapitha**, Belur: 500 saris from 6 September to 26 October; and 3,000 shirts from 21 August to 19 September.

(pp) **Sargachhi**: 6,000 T-shirts and 2,000 jackets or sweaters from 18 February to 21 July and 1,000 T-shirts from 6 September to 21 October.

(qq) **Shimla**: 564 shirts, 300 trousers, and 236 tops from 1 May to 5 October.

(rr) **Shyampukur Bati**, Kolkata: 110 saris on 29 and 30 September.

(ss) **Silchar**: 4,936 shirts or T-shirts, 760 dhotis, and 2,400 saris from 29 August to 14 October.

(tt) **Sinthei**, Kolkata: 100 saris and 474 shirts from 11 to 30 September.

(uu) **Sohra** (Cherrapunjee): 11,255 shirts, 4,600 T-shirts, 14,177 trousers, 11,907 tops, and 7,348 sweaters or jackets from 2 February to 31 March.

(vv) **Swamiji's Ancestral House**, Kolkata: 680 shirts, 320 T-shirts, and 498 trousers from 31 August to 28 September.

(ww) **Taki**: 190 saris, 3,000 shirts, and 3,000 trousers from 7 September to 7 November.

(xx) **Tamluk**: 488 shirts and 485 trousers from 14 August to 30 September.

(yy) **Vrindaban**: 450 kg rice, 450 kg flour, 112 kg dal, 112 kg cooking oil, 225 kg salt, 112

kg sugar, 22 kg tea leaves, 45 kg milk powder, and 45 kg turmeric powder on 28 September; and 2,000 shirts, 1,000 T-shirts, and 1,000 trousers from 20 September to 5 October. Also 440 kg rice, 440 kg flour, 110 kg dal, 110 kg cooking oil, 220 packets of turmeric powder, 220 kg salt, 22 kg tea leaves, 110 kg sugar, 44 kg milk powder, and 220 bars of bathing soap on 5 November.

**Bangladesh:** (a) **Bagerhat**: 180 saris and 25 cooking pots on

26 September.

(b) **Baliati**: 31 saris, 84 sets of children's garments, and 16 towels from 5 to 15 October.

(c) **Chandpur**: 140 saris on 7 October.

(d) **Chittagong**: 200 saris, 100 sets of children's garments, 4,000 kg rice, 400 kg dal, and 400 kg edible oil from 15 to 30 September.

(e) **Dhaka**: 300 saris in October.

(f) **Dinajpur**: 2,500 saris on 3 October.

(g) **Mymensingh**: 450 saris, 40 sets of ladies' garments, and 12 shirts from 22 September to 2 October.

(h) **Sylhet**: 300 dhotis and 300 saris in October.

**Zambia: Lusaka**: 1 laptop computer and 100 kg powdered maize on 8 and 21 September; and 200 assorted clothes, 40 pairs of shoes, and 100 kg powdered maize on 17 and 19 October. Also 100 kg powdered maize to an orphanage on 19 November, and 450 concrete blocks to a philanthropic organisation on 20 November for constructing a building.

**Winter Relief:** The following centres distributed blankets and winter garments:

(a) **Aalo**: 15 sweaters on 1 November.

(b) **Bajepratappur**, Bardhaman: 1,000 sweaters on 27 October.



*Cyclone Relief by Manasadwip Centre*



*Cyclone Relief by Sarisha Centre*

(c) **Baranagar Mission**, Kolkata: 120 blankets from 28 September to 6 October.

(d) **Cossipore**, Kolkata: 300 blankets from 5 September to 15 November.

(e) **Gourhati**: 500 blankets and 1,000 jackets or sweaters from 2 September to 27 November.

(f) **Guwahati**: 353 jackets or sweaters from 1 to 14 November.

(g) **Hatamuniguda**: 500 blankets from 17 to 24 November.

(h) **Indore**: 500 blankets on 10 November.

(i) **Jamtara**: 500 blankets from 13 to 19 September.

(j) **Lalgarh**: 500 blankets from 7 September to 15 November.

(k) **Limbdi**: 135 sweaters on 22 and 23 November.

(l) **Nagpur**: 1,000 sweaters from 1 December 2018 to 10 October 2019.

(m) **Narottam Nagar**: 209 sweaters and 706 sweatshirts on 27 and 30 September.

(n) **Puri Mission**: 100 blankets on 12 October and 590 blankets from 4 to 30 November.

(o) **Rahara**, Kolkata: 617 sweaters from 23 August to 28 September, and 80 blankets on 24 November.

(q) **Raipur**: 174 blankets on 2 and 21 November.

(r) **Rajkot**: 986 jackets from 30 March to 20 April.

(s) **RKMVERI**, Belur: 32 blankets and 75 sweaters on 9 April.

(t) **Shimla**: 268 sweaters, 77 sweatshirts, and 455 jackets from 1 May to 5 October.

(u) **Tamluk**: 1,000 blankets, 397 jackets, and 112 sweaters from 14 August to 15 September.

(v) **Yelagiri**: 500 blankets on 22 October.

**Flood Rehabilitation**: (i) **Kerala**: (a) In the aftermath of the floods that had hit Kerala in August 2018, the **Headquarters** distributed 400 bicycles to school girls in Alappuzha district on 7 September, 20 September, and 31 October through **Kochi** centre.

(b) In response to recent floods in the state, **Koyilandy** centre distributed 10 sewing machines among 10 affected families in Kozhikode district on 10 September.

(ii) **Bihar**: In response to flooding in Katiyar district, **Katiyar** centre distributed 4,000 kg *chira*, rice flakes, and 500 kg *gur*, molasses, among 1,333 families from 27 September to 18 October.

**Economic Rehabilitation**: Under self-employment programme, **Porbandar** centre distributed 9 sewing machines on 5 and 18 September to poor and needy people.

**Zambia: Lusaka** centre handed over 4 sewing machines to a skill development training institute on 9 November.

**Fire Relief: Assam:** In response to a fire incident in Karimganj in which 4 houses were completely burnt down, **Karimganj** centre distributed 4 dhotis, 4 saris, 4 blankets, 5 sets of children's garments, 4 mosquito-nets, 4 *handis*, 8 plates, and 4 tumblers among the 4 affected families on 30 September.

**Cyclone Relief:** In the wake of the devastation caused by Cyclone Bulbul in North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas and Medinipur districts in India, and in some parts of Bangladesh, the following centres conducted relief:

(i) **India: West Bengal:**

(a) **Manasadwip** centre provided shelter to 230 persons of Manasadwip on 9 November and served cooked food to 7,522 persons from 10 to 12 November.

(b) **Sarisha** centre distributed 23,360 kg rice, 5,490 kg dal, 7,100 kg potatoes, 1,398 kg cooking oil, 1,978 blankets, 3,000 saris, 800 dhotis, 1,800 lungis, and 800 *uttariyas* among 1,996 affected families in South 24 Parganas district from 18 to 21 November.

(c) **Taki** centre distributed 2,000 kg *chira*, 750 kg sugar, 4,032 packets of biscuits, and 2,160 candles among 2,412 cyclone-affected persons in North 24 Parganas district from 12 to 17 November.

(ii) **Bangladesh: Bagerhat** centre distributed 1,000 kg rice, 100 saris, and 100 lungis among 100 families in Satkhira district on 15 November.

**Distress Rehabilitation: Rahara** centre distributed a tricycle, 3 wheelchairs, and 6 walking sticks among differently-abled people from 22 September to 27 November.

### Free Eye Camps

Several centres of the Ramakrishna Mission

conducted eye camps and some patients were given free spectacles and vitamins. A cumulative report is given here in the table below, covering the period from October 2018 to November 2019.

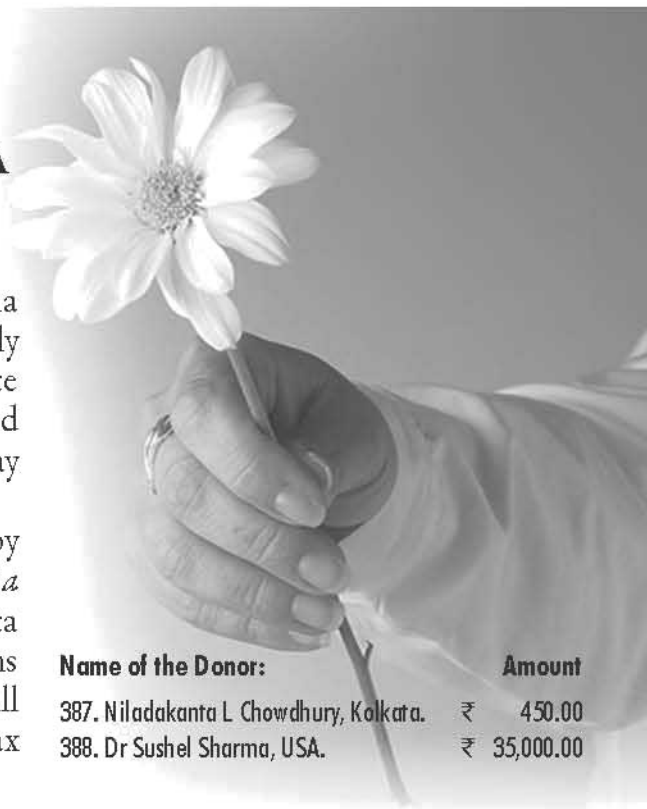


Eye Camps			
Centre	Patients	Spectacles	Surgeries
Agartala	740	-	-
Aalo	288	172	-
Asansol	128	-	19
Bankura	6,664	664	1224
Chengalpattu and Chennai Math	950	424	107
Dehradun	10,904	1378	1,741
Delhi	1,382	508	256
Gourhati	300	17	39
Halasuru	727	402	406
Jamshedpur	909	-	470
Kamarpukur	6,226	1,211	1,380
Khetri	937	-	326
Koyilandy	82	4	-
Lucknow	50,549	-	4,999
Madurai	1,668	317	413
Malda	218	64	-
Medinipur	75	-	7
Mumbai	566	341	103
Nagpur	714	436	88
Porbandar	934	-	332
Rajamahendravaram	2,263	522	215
Rajkot	1,310	-	570
Ranchi Morabadi	10,923	688	233
Salem	3,535	808	622
Saradapitha	2966	-	700
Seva Pratishthan	850	130	223
Sikra-Kulingram	144	31	31
Vadodara	1,159	32	141
Varanasi Home of Service	163	160	160
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,08,274</b>	<b>8,309</b>	<b>14,805</b>

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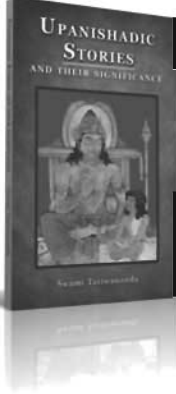
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***By Asim Chaudhuri***



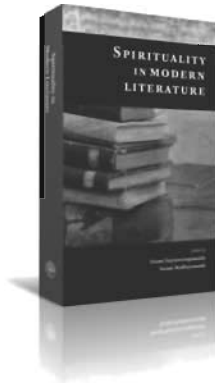
This book explores Swami Vivekananda's unselfish and benevolent love for his brother disciples, and the world in general. The analysis and conclusion presented in the book are the author's own, and may not represent the general views of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. The author is grateful to Advaita Ashrama for agreeing to sell and distribute this book.

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*Dear Ma,  
Thank you for wonderful Darshan.  
With loving pranams,*

*Ferdos, Valerie, Nahid and Tamara  
Trabuco Canyon, USA*





“Shri Ramakrishna was a wonderful gardener. Therefore he has made a bouquet of different flowers and formed his Order. All different types and ideas have come into it, and many more will come. Know each of those who are here to be of great spiritual power. Because they remain shrivelled before me, do not think them to be ordinary souls. When they will go out, they will be the cause of the awakening of spirituality in people. Know them to be part of the spiritual body of Shri Ramakrishna, who was the embodiment of infinite religious ideas. [Y]ou may go round the world, but it is doubtful if you will find men of such spirituality and faith in God like them. They are each a centre of religious power, and in time that power will manifest.”

*Swami Vivekananda [referring to his brother disciples]*

*With loving pranams from your  
Dedicated Servants.*

—Singapore Devotees

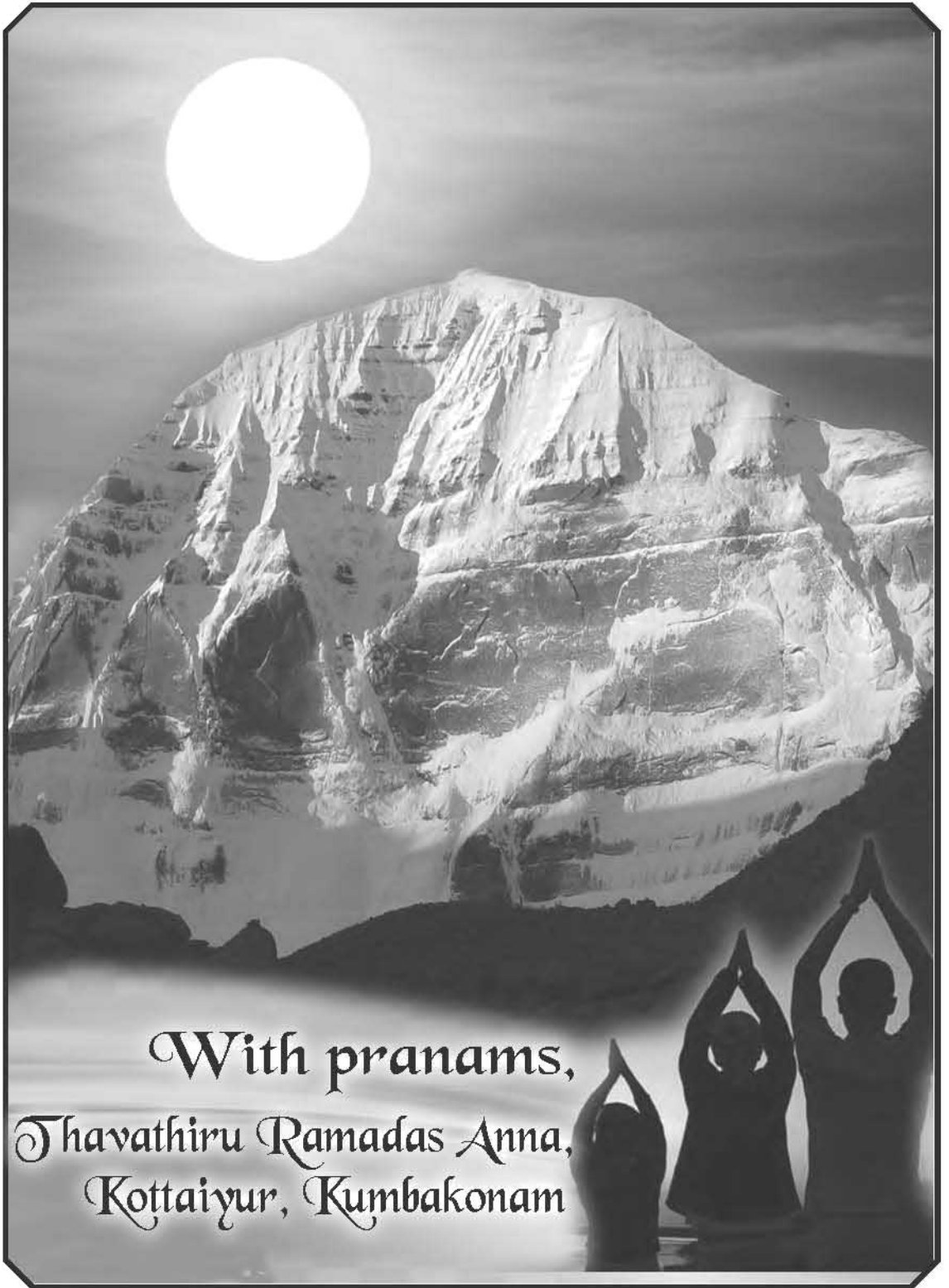
Who is the Best devotee of God? It is he who sees, after the realization of Brahman that God alone has become all living beings the universe, and the twenty-four cosmic principles.

—Sri Ramakrishna



**Happy New Year from the  
DC DEVOTEES**







“Do not fear, my child. Always remember that the Master is behind you. I am also with you. As long as you remember me, your mother, why should be frightened? The Master said to me, ‘In the end I shall certainly liberate those who come to you.’ ”

—Holy Mother Sree Sarada Devi



**Swami Prabuddhananda**  
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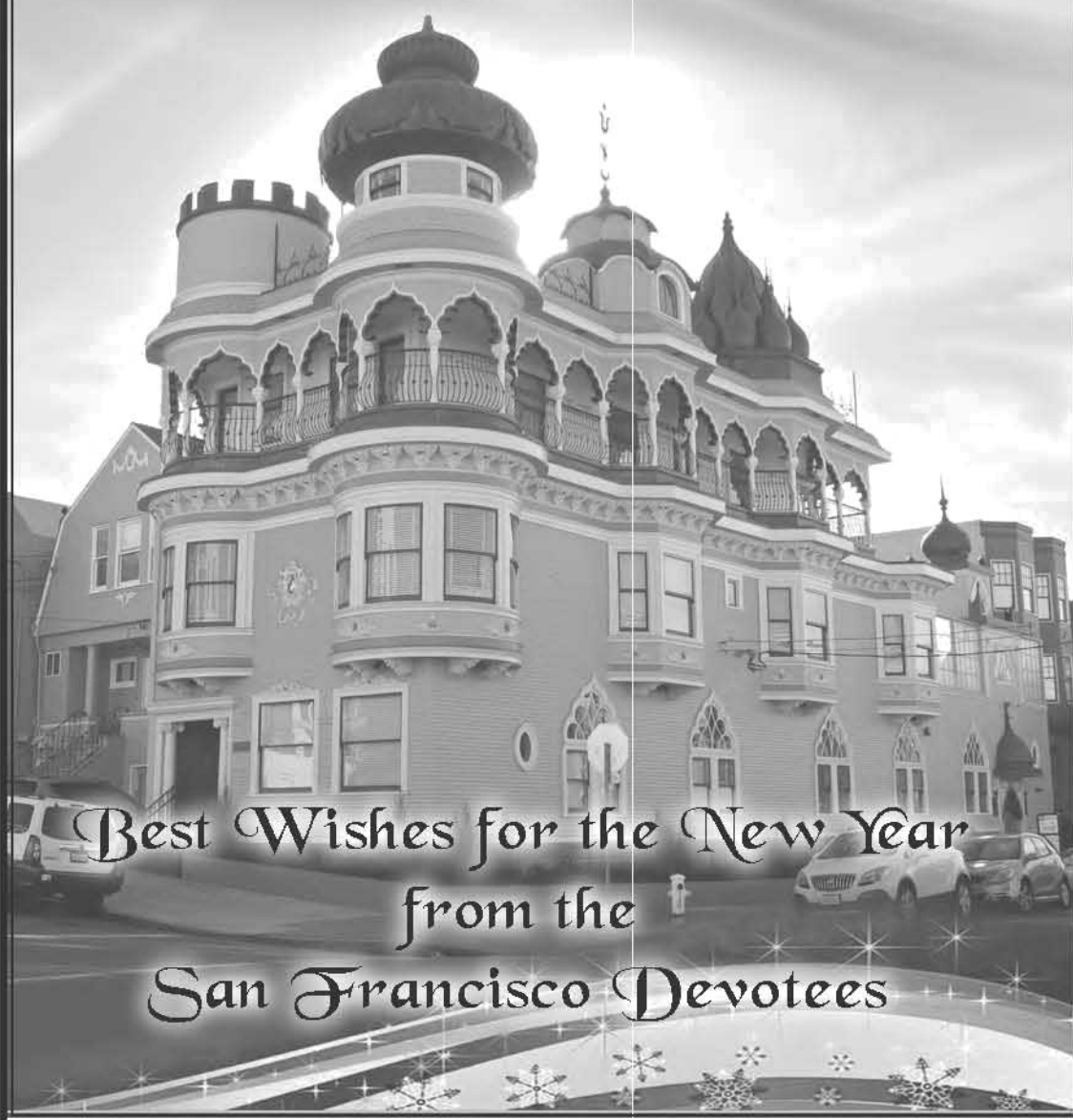
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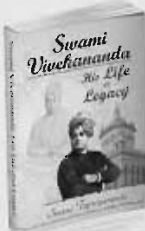
—Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi



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—Swami Vivekananda

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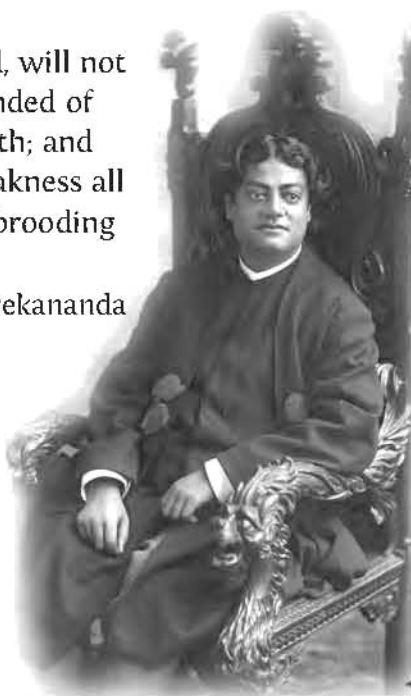
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Ashrama is one of the old Spritual, Cultural, Educational and Social service centre of Kerala. It has a School (Brahmanandodaym Schools) from Kindergarten to +2, Gurukulam Hostel for Boys, Computer and Typewriting centre for Scheduled Caste and economically backward classes. Ashrama conducts flood and disaster relief programmes in the State. Besides there are other services and rural activities. Ashrama has a temple with a marble statue of Sri Ramakrishna and an Auditorium to conduct worship, prayers, spiritual activities, retreats and discourses.



All the above services during these 83 long years are tendered by the tireless services of dedicated monks. Due to the paucity of funds, there is no dedicated building (Sadhu Nivas) for Monks. Monks are staying in the buildings which are more than 80-90 years old. They are made of clay mortar and have tiled roofs. The walls are feeble, rafters are weak, roof always leaks during monsoon. This has rendered the buildings uninhabitable.



Hence the construction of a suitable monks' quarters and a devotees dining hall is the urgent need of the hour. Project is estimated to **cost around 1.5 crores.**

We appeal to the benevolent people, devotees, corporate units to join hands in this noble project with generous financial help. We earnestly hope that this Appeal will receive the compassionate attention of you all.

Donations are eligible for tax exemptions under Sec. 80G of IT Act. Donations may be sent either by cheque or bank draft in favour of Sri Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama or by transfer through RTGS/NEFT to (i) A/c No. 2921101005444, Canara Bank, Kalady (IFSC: CNRB0002921) or (ii) A/c No. 10367019646, State Bank of India, Kalady (IFSC: SBIN0070717) and for foreign contributions, A/c No: 338602010005806, Union Bank of India, Kalady (IFSC: UBIN0533866, MICR Code: 682026047, Swift Code: UBININBBKCH).

Please provide PAN No. for payments of Rs.10,000/- and above. Kindly send an email to [kalady@rkmm.org](mailto:kalady@rkmm.org) intimating us your name, address, phone nos. and the payment details.

Yours in the Service of the Lord,

Swami Srividyananda

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## An Appeal

The composer of the Kathamrita (Gospel of Ramakrishna), Sri Mahendra Nath Gupta's residential house (Kathamrita Bhavan) has become a Branch Centre of the Ramakrishna Math, Belur Math. Sri Sri Thakur, Sri Sri Ma, Sri Sri Swamiji and other disciples of Thakur, have all blessed this holy place with the dust of their feet. As the space of this heritage building is very small, an adjacent Building was recently purchased by the Math Centre. In addition to serving as an abode for spiritual Sadhakas, this centre provides free services to the poor, including a Charitable Dispensary, a Free Coaching centre for poor students, and also a Computer Training Centre for the underprivileged at nominal rates. The



building which provides these services is more than two hundred years old, and in urgent need of renovation. The cost for renovation will be approximately INR 1 Cr. (One Crore). We humbly request that the sincere devotees of the Holy Trio kindly and generously support this noble cause. May the blessings of the Holy Trio and Sri M be bestowed upon all of you is our ardent prayer. Donations, either Cash / Cheque/ RTGS/NEFT/Draft should be sent to Ramakrishna Math, Kathamrita Bhavan and include the Devotees full Address. Cheques should be made payable to: Ramakrishna Math, Kathamrita Bhavan.

Bank details are as follows: State Bank of India, Branch Srimani Market, A/c No.37162044100. IFSC Code-SBIN0031539.

All donations are exempt from Income Tax under section 80 G. With reverence and salutations to all.



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Swami Nirvanananda, Vice-President (1966-1984)  
Ramakrishna Math And Ramakrishna Mission

**Question:** How can one easily realise God ?

**Answer:** The day one can love his friend and foe in the same light, he can easily realize God

—Srimat Swami Nirvananandaji Maharaj

*This answer was given by Revered Maharaj in his room at Belur Math in 1971, in response to the question by my mother, a disciple of Swami Nirvananandaji.*

With sastanga pranams from his Anonymous Disciple

## Swami Vireswarananda Answers

**Question:** What is the place of the Guru in spiritual life?

**SV:** What is the place of the professor in your education? What is the place of the professor under whom you carry on some research work or write a thesis for a Ph. D degree? The same answer is applicable here too. You are given certain lines on which to proceed and the rest of it you have to do yourself. The Guru will help you now and then when you are going wrong or when you are stuck up in your experiments. Just as you work in a laboratory under a professor for your research, here also you are guided by a person and according to his instructions you proceed. Swami Brahmanandaji once answered the question, 'Is there any need for a Guru?' by saying: "Even to learn pick-pocketing one needs a Guru and for Brahma-vidya you think no Guru is necessary?" So, for any subject, without any help from outside you can't proceed.

**Question:** Maharaj, why do we get distracted and lose our concentration when we sit for our spiritual practices? Is there no remedy?

**SV:** You see, at the beginning for some time the mind will be restless and will get disturbed by small things. So concentration will be difficult. But do not be depressed at that. It is the common experience of all beginners. Stick to the practice with determination and bring the mind again and again to the object of worship and meditation, if you find it has wandered away. It is desires that make the mind restless and make concentration difficult. Renounce these desires through discrimination (*vichara*) and purify your mind and then you will have concentration. Practice and *Vairagya* get concentration of mind. By *Vairagya* I mean discrimination and weeding out of all desires (*vasanas*) from the mind, thus making the mind purer and purer. When the mind becomes pure you will be able to meditate well and derive great joy. The struggle will be there for one or two years at least. So stick to spiritual practice daily and regularly and all your difficulties will be overcome. Concentration does not come so easily; you go on with your practices regularly and in course of time you will have good concentration.



**Question:** That's a heartening thought, Maharaj. But sometimes our mind tends to become so depressed that we cannot concentrate on Japa at all.

**SV:** The mind is also within the sphere of matter and has its ebb and flow like the river. So do not be afraid of such periods. When you feel this kind of depression or when you find your mind not in its normal mood, pray to Sri Ramakrishna to remove this mood from your mind and He will help. Even great souls had such periods of depression.

(Source: "Practical Hints on Meditative Life, Vedanta Kesari, August 1988)

*In reverential homage*

**Bani, Bhaskar, Debasree, Devajit & Ruchira Roy**  
(Chittaranjan Park, New Delhi)

Unselfishness is more paying,  
only people have not the pa-  
tience to practise it.

—*Swami Vivekananda*—



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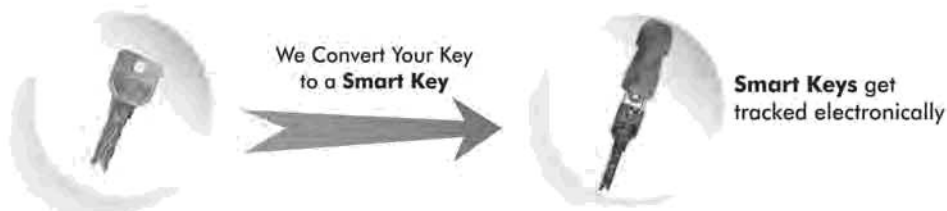
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- ☐ Working with over 150 Ramakrishna Mission Centers, some which are affiliated with Belur Math and some which are privately run.
- ☐ Honoring other past great Swamis of Ramakrishna Order including Subodhanandaji, Premeshanandaji, Bhuteshanandaji, Chandikanandaji, Atmasthanandaji, Swahanandaji, Aksharanandaji & Tathagatanandaji and Sadhu Nag Mahasaya & Master Mahasaya by establishing Memorial Funds in their names for the Vivekananda Scholarship to serve students in remote villages.
- ☐ Established Vivekananda History Fund in Dhaka University and Jagannath University at Dhaka.
- ☐ Created the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Fund for Vivekananda Scholarship in South Africa and Zambia.



### **Contact us:**

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## PILGRIM'S GUIDE TO THE HOLY TRIO IN KOLKATA



### Madan Mohan Mandir, Baghbazar

The Madan Mohan Mandir in Baghbazar was visited by the Holy Trio on separate occasions. It has an interesting history behind it. Originally the Madan Mohan image was discovered in Vishnupur by a Brahmin family. However, in the late sixteenth century, Raja Bir Hambir, king of Vishnupur, attracted by the image, brought it to his palace and started worshipping it as his family deity. This worship continued by his royal descendants. However in 1751, Bengal the Marathas attacked West Bengal and slaughtered thousands. Raja Gopal Singha Dev was the ruling king of Vishnupur at this time. The Marathas decided to attack Vishnupur during the night. Raja was unaware of this and did not have his army protecting his kingdom. However, the next day when he woke up, he saw that thousands of Marathi soldiers lay dead and others had fled. Eyewitnesses said that their family deity (Madan Mohan) in the guise of a small

boy came riding on a horse and had fired and destroyed the enemy Marathas singlehandedly. In 1770, the Vishnupur King, Chaitanya Singh Dev was again attacked. This time, unable to defend himself, the King ran away from Vishnupur with Madan Mohan to Baghbazar, and took shelter at Gokul Mitra's house. Due to straitened financial circumstances, he mortgaged the idol of Madan Mohan to Gokul Mitra. In the beginning, Madan Mohan was kept and worshipped at Mitra's home. Later a separate temple was constructed for Madan Mohan adjacent to his house. He also had an idol of Radhika made and placed her on the left hand side of Madan Mohan. At present, nobody stays at this palatial residence. The two large

celebrations here are Sri Radhika Annakut which is celebrated the day after Kali Puja, and Holi, where Madan Mohan is brought to the courtyard on the ground floor. The address is 520 Rabindra Sarani, Baghbazar.



Madan Mohan Mandir, Baghbazar

*In loving memory of Dr. Rina Bhar —Dr. Gopal Chandra Bhar*





*The best guide in life is strength. In religion,  
as in all other matters, discard everything  
that weakens you, have nothing to do  
with it.*

*—Swami Vivekananda*



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